ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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NEW Stories presented by the master of SUSPENSE

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June 1973

Dear Reader:

If May flowers have failed to appear by this time, I urge you to exercise restraint in performing spadework to turn up the reason. You could discover more than lifeless seeds and bulbs. It then may cause an undue trampling of the entire lawn, should the police have more than one missing person on their reports. Be patient. After all, Mother Nature—a bit mysterious herself—may be off leafing through a copy of her favorite magazine, where freshness prevails as in few breezes these days.

Surely you are not under the impression you are peering into a garden catalog, but in that event I will hasten to inform you that this month's issue of mystery and suspense is replete with a variety of diggers in crime only, from those who plant clues to those who unearth solutions. See them all, from *The Art of Deduction* by Richard Deming to the novelette titled *That Day on the Cliff* by Carol Russell.

Good reading.

Alfred Hitchcock

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Contrarily, situations do arise wherein the mean between deduction and seduction may be considerably narrowed.

THE ART OF DEDUCTION

The girl in front of me at the loading gate was a slim, shapely brunette with a deep tan, nice features and a cute little nose that was just beginning to peel from sunburn. While we waited, I made up my mind that I would do my best to get the seat next to her, if I could manage it without being too obvious.

When we boarded the plane I was in luck. All the window seats but one were taken. When she took that, it was quite natural for me to slide in beside her. As no one took the aisle seat, I had her to myself.

I made no attempt at conversation right then, because I am always a little nervous on takeoff and landing, but when we were airborne and the stewardess had finished her little welcome-aboard talk, I turned an expansive smile on the girl.

"Hi, seatmate," I said. "My name is Albert Shelton."

She looked a little startled, but after examining me speculatively for a moment, she seemed to decide I was harmless. "How do you do, Albert? I'm Diane Wharton."

"Shall we get the vital statistics out of the way?" I inquired.

"What do you mean?"

"I always talk to the person next to me on a plane, and from past experience it seems likely that in the course of conversation I will reveal a good deal of data about myself, and in return will learn a good deal about you. It

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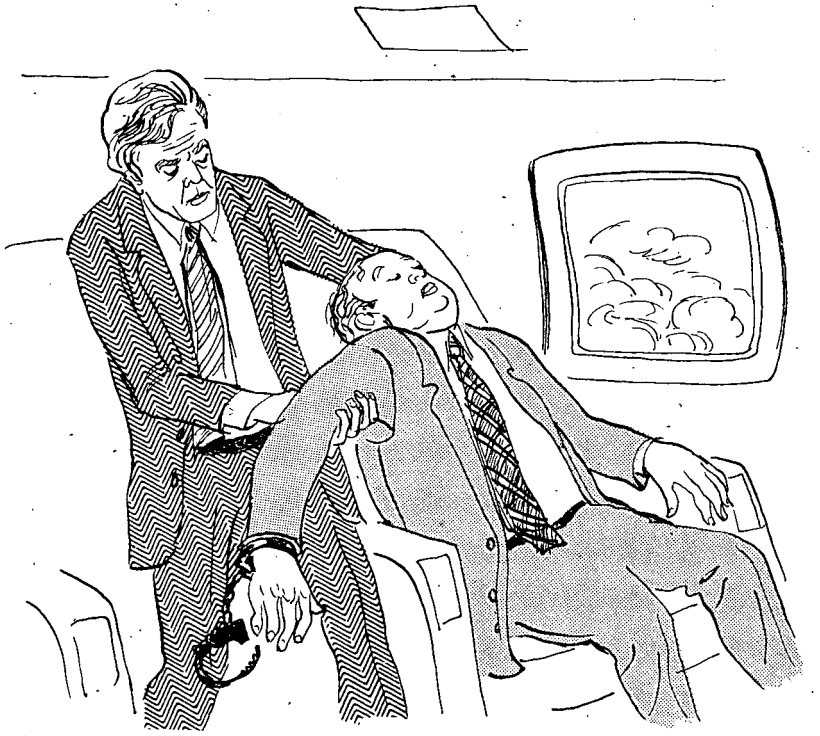
would save considerable time if we disposed of this matter at once, so we could get on to more interesting things. I am twenty-five, unmarried, and two months ago graduated from U.C.L.A. I finished school at such an advanced age because I spent from age eighteen to twenty-one in the army. I am en route to Buffalo to accept a job with the Appleton Detective Agency, which happens to be owned by my uncle. Fred Appleton, of whom you may have heard since you also are from Buffalo, is my mother's older brother."

She gave me another startled look. "How do you know I'm from Buffalo?"

"Elementary, my dear Wharton. I looked over your shoulder when

by Richard Deming



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you handed in your ticket at the gate, and the flight-reservation envelope you took it from showed you had bought a round-trip ticket from Buffalo."

She emitted a tinkling little laugh. "You're funny. You sound just like Sherlock Holmes. But I suppose that's appropriate, since you're going to be a private eye."

"We in the profession prefer the term 'confidential investigator.'"

Her eyes twinkled. "Excuse me. I suppose you took your degree in either criminalistics or police administration."

I shook my head. "I was not, until a week ago, planning a career as a confidential investigator. I majored in philosophy and logic, but in our technological society there doesn't seem to be much demand for specialists in those fields. In a sense, I am accepting my uncle's job offer as a last resort. Yet the prospects interest me intensely, and actually I feel my educational background will be of considerable value. Great criminalists of the past have often depended more on deductive reasoning than on scientific knowledge; men such as the late Raymond Schindler, for example."

"You seem to have some deductive talent," she said. "I was quite impressed by your guess that I am from Buffalo. Can you tell me anything else about myself?"

After studying her judiciously, I said, "Well, for starters, your purpose for being in Southern California was simply vacationing."

"Oh? How did you deduce that?"

"From three factors. First, you wouldn't have bought a round-trip ticket if you were out here looking for work, or had planned to live here for some other reason, then changed your mind. Second, August is a vacation month. Third, your fresh suntan indicates you have recently spent a good deal of time on the beach. I know it's a fresh suntan because you got your nose sunburned acquiring it. You neglected to put suntan oil on your nose, didn't you?"

She regarded me with a mixture of amusement and awe. "You're amazing. Tell me more."

"All right. You were visiting your fiancé out here, and just before you left, you broke your engagement."

She gave me a suspicious sideglance. "You've been following me, haven't you, private eye? Excuse me; I mean confidential investigator."

"I never saw you until just before we boarded the plane. I know you broke your engagement because the white circle around

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the ring finger of your left hand is just the size and shape of an engagement ring. Its whiteness indicates you have not been out in the sun since you took it off. Ergo, you gave it back at the very end of your vacation."

She emitted another of her tinkling little laughs.

"What's so funny?" I asked.

"It sounds so simple when you explain it. I would be more impressed if you kept the explanations to yourself. Is that it, or is there more?"

"Oh, yes. Your fiancé either has been studying criminalistics and police administration at U.C.L.A., or is teaching one or the other."

She cocked a quizzical eyebrow. "How in the world did you deduce that?"

"Because you asked me if I had taken my degree in either subject. Being from Buffalo, how would you know they are taught at U.C.L.A. unless you had a close relationship with either a student or teacher in that department?"

"Goodness, you're remarkable."

"Quite elementary, really. One last item. You graduated from the University of Buffalo a year ago, probably from the school of nursing."

She cocked an eyebrow at me again. "I suppose the explanation for that deduction is just as simple as the rest," she said teasingly.

"Even more so. I cheated a little this time. I recognized the class ring you're wearing on your right hand because my last year in service I dated an army nurse who had graduated from the University of Buffalo. And the year of graduation is embossed on your ring in large enough figures to be seen quite plainly."

"That doesn't explain your deduction that I am a nurse."

"That was just a wild guess," I admitted. "Sort of a hunch. Because the only girl I ever knew who wore a similar ring was a nurse, I guess I was guilty of a sophism that just happened to be valid."

"Sophism," she said. "I remember that from my one course in philosophy. A specious argument based on a false premise."

"Yes. All R.N.s graduating from the University of Buffalo are entitled to wear school rings. Therefore all girls wearing U. of B. school rings are R.N.s."

Diane giggled.

"I'll concede it was nothing more than a lucky guess," I said. "But my other deductions were based on sound enough evidence, weren't they?"

"I think you're wonderful," she said with apparent sincerity.

Although by then I was reason-

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ably sure that Diane liked me as much as I was growing to like her, she volunteered very little information about herself other than what I had deduced. For instance, she told me nothing about her ex-fiancé or what had caused their breakup, and naturally I didn't pry. She did tell me that she lived with her parents in a two-family house on Fillmore in Buffalo, however, and when I asked if I might call her sometime, she consented and wrote her phone number on the inside of a matchbook.

We had left Los Angeles at 11:50 a.m. By the time we landed at Detroit at 5:50 p.m., Detroit time, we had become firm friends.

After the passengers who were getting off at Detroit had deplaned, the stewardess signaled for the rope at the loading gate to be removed and passengers began streaming toward the plane.

The plane took off, and as soon as the seat-belt sign was lifted I excused myself to go back to the rest room. In the last seat on the left, I noticed two men handcuffed together. Both men were in their late forties. It was easy enough to tell which man was the cop and which the prisoner. The man nearest the aisle had to be the cop, because his left wrist was cuffed to the other man's right. He was a tall, very pale man somewhat resembling Abraham Lincoln without a beard. The other was also tall, but heavier-set and with a round, fleshy face, deeply tanned.

The stewardess was taking dinner orders, and I heard both men order coffee with their meals. I got back to my seat at the same time the stewardess got that far. Diane and I both ordered Swiss steak. Then I told her about the two men in the back seat.

"What does the prisoner look like?" she asked.

"Quite ordinary. Pushing fifty, I would guess."

We dropped the subject then, because our dinners came.

When dinner period was over and the stewardess had collected everyone's dishes, a buzz of excited conversation behind us caused us both to rise to our feet and peer toward the rear of the plane. The tall, pale police officer was in the act of lifting the limp form of his seatmate out into the aisle to lay him flat on his back. He had unlocked the cuff from his own wrist, but the other ring was still clamped about the prisoner's wrist. He knelt next to the unconscious man, feeling his pulse.

The stewardess hurried along the aisle from the front to see what was going on.

Looking up at her, the detec-

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tive said, "I think he's having a heart attack. His pulse is very slow and weak."

Like us, most of the other passengers toward the rear of the plane had risen to their feet to gaze back that way. A lean, rather distinguished-looking man in his mid-forties, who had been seated all alone across the aisle from us and one seat back, stepped out into the aisle as the stewardess started to kneel next to the prone man and said, "I'm a doctor, Miss."

The stewardess immediately rose and stepped aside so that the doctor could squeeze past her. The detective introduced himself to the doctor as Sergeant Copeland, then got out of the way by reseating himself.

Kneeling next to the unconscious man, the doctor thumbed back an eyelid, peered into the eye, then unbuttoned the man's suit coat, stripped off his necktie and unbuttoned his shirt. Looking up at the stewardess, he said, "My medical bag is beneath my seat. Will you get it, please?"

She brought him the bag, he drew a stethoscope from it and listened to the patient's heartbeat. After a few moments he put the stethoscope away, zipped his bag shut and stood up.

"Coronary thrombosis, probably," he said to the stewardess. "Fortunately you're equipped with oxygen. How long before we land at Buffalo?"

Glancing at her watch, she said, "It's seven, and we're due in at quarter to eight."

"Roughly three-quarters of an hour," the doctor said. "I suggest you have the pilot radio to have an ambulance standing by to take the man to City Hospital. He can tell them no intern need come along with the ambulance, as I am on the City Hospital staff and will ride in with the patient. As a matter of fact, no one but the driver will be necessary, as the sergeant and I can act as litter bearers. As soon as you've delivered the message, bring a blanket to keep the patient warm."

"Yes, sir," the stewardess said, and hurried forward to disappear into the pilot's cabin.

The doctor said to the detective, "Let's get him up on the seat so that we can start giving him oxygen. If you'll retract the armrests between seats, we can lay him on his back." He glanced around and his gaze fell on me. "You look pretty husky, young man. Will you give us a hand?"

I went back and helped lift the inert form onto the seat. When the patient was on his back across all three seats, the doctor pulled

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out the seat's oxygen mask and affixed it to the man's face. Then he checked his heart with his stethoscope again.

"No worse, but no better either," he said as he slipped the instrument back into his bag. "He might be more comfortable without that manacle dangling from his wrist, Sergeant."

Sergeant Copeland took a key from his pocket, unlocked the cuff and dropped the handcuffs into his coat pocket.

"Incidentally, my name is Martin Smith," the doctor said, offering the detective his hand.

Shaking it, the sergeant said, "Glad to know you, Dr. Smith. And I'm certainly glad you were aboard."

"My name is Albert Shelton," I offered.

Both of them looked at me. The doctor said politely, "Thank you for your help, Albert."

"You're welcome. Dr. Smith, my seatmate is a registered nurse, if you need her help."

He gave me a surprised look. "Well, thanks, but there is nothing she could do at the moment." Turning to the elderly man who was the sole occupant of the seat directly across the aisle from the patient, he said, "Sir, would you mind moving up to the seat I was occupying, so that I can sit here near the patient, in case he—"

"Not at all," the man said, immediately moving forward.

"Want to sit next to the window, Sergeant?" the doctor asked. "I had better stay on the aisle so that I can keep an eye on him."

"In a minute," the detective said. "I just had a weird thought."

Leaning over the patient, Sergeant Copeland rummaged in the unconscious man's coat pocket and withdrew a small bottle of liquid. He handed it to the doctor. Looking over the doctor's shoulder, I read the label the same time he did. It said: *Sweet-as-Sugar.* Below that, in smaller print, was *Concentrated Sweetener* and *No Cyclamates.*

Looking up, the doctor said, "A common sugar substitute. What about it?"

"At dinner he wanted to put some in his coffee. After examining the bottle, I let him. It just occurred to me there might be something other than artificial sweetener in there. This could have been attempted suicide, since he was going back to New York to face twenty more years of hard time."

"Hmm," the doctor said. Unscrewing the cap, he sniffed at the bottle's contents, then recapped it. "I really can't tell, and I'm not about to taste it to find out. We'll

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take it along to the hospital and have it analyzed."

He dropped the bottle into his pocket, then added, "There are a number of poisons that cause the same symptoms as coronary thrombosis. If it were a suicide attempt, I couldn't possibly guess which one until we can get the contents of this bottle analyzed. But if he's been in custody, where would he have gotten hold of any poison?"

Sergeant Copeland said, "Until recently he hasn't been in custody for weeks. He escaped from Sing Sing six weeks ago, and was arrested on the West Coast only about a week back. He may have decided to carry a suicide potion around just in case he was caught. And he would know what to get. He's been an aide in the prison medical dispensary for the past five years."

"What was he in prison for?" the doctor asked.

"About three dozen bank robberies. Don't you remember Willie the Parrot Doyle?"

After considering, the doctor said, "Vaguely. A number of years back, wasn't it?"

"About a dozen. He's been in stir for ten. He was head of the Doyle Gang, which once consisted of eight or nine gunmen. All but two, aside from Willie himself, are now either in prison or dead. Willie's younger brother Jim and Smooth Eddie Greene, who is a cousin of Willie's, are both at large. As a matter of fact, Greene has never even been arrested, so we don't have mug shots of him. Jim Doyle has a record, though, and I've seen his mugs. Looks like a younger version of Willie."

I had been standing there silent all this time, but now I put in, "How did Doyle get his nickname of Willie the Parrot?"

"He used to talk a lot when pulling bank jobs," the sergeant explained. "Kept up a steady flow of banter with the bank employees and customers as he directed them to lie on the floor on their stomachs, or herded them into vaults. Apologized to the ladies for inconveniencing them, told the ugly ones they were beautiful, cracked a lot of jokes. Just kept up a steady stream of chatter."

"How about Smooth Eddie Greene?" I asked.

"He's called that because he's actually more con man than bank robber. He used to case banks by representing himself as an industrialist who was planning to open a branch factory in town. He would ask to see the manager in order to discuss whether the bank would be capable of handling a million-dollar-a-month payroll.

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Bank managers have been known to explain their alarm systems in detail in order to convince him his company funds would be safe in their banks."

The stewardess came along with a blanket, which she handed to the doctor. She said, "The pilot radioed your message. An ambulance from City Hospital will be there. He told them no attendants other than the driver will be needed."

"Good," Dr. Smith acknowledged.

After tucking the blanket around the patient, he bent to listen to his breathing. When he straightened again, the stewardess asked, "Is he all right?"

"He's far from all right," Dr. Smith told her. "But he's still alive."

The stewardess went away again. The doctor turned to the detective. "Will you be wanting to ride along in the ambulance with us, Sergeant?"

"Naturally."

"In his condition he won't be running off. And there is a prison ward at City Hospital he couldn't escape from even if he fully recovered. But it's up to you."

"Thanks, I'll stick with my prisoner," the detective said in a definite tone.

Dr. Smith shrugged. "If it is a heart attack instead of a poisoning, he probably won't be able to be moved for at least a month. You won't wait around all that time, will you?"

"Oh, no. I'll leave him in the custody of the Buffalo police and come back for him when he's again able to travel. Why are we still standing here in the aisle? Let's sit down."

He slid over against the window in the seat across the aisle from the unconscious man. The doctor took the aisle seat, leaving me the only one standing.

"He'll probably be assigned as one of my patients, since I'm taking him in," Dr. Smith said. "If you'll give me your card, I'll keep you abreast of his condition."

The detective took out a wallet, searched through it and said apologetically, "I seem to be out of cards. Do you have a piece of paper?"

Searching his pockets, the doctor came up with his flight-reservation envelope and handed it to the detective. Sergeant Copeland laid it on his knee, took out a pen and began to write on it. I turned away and returned to my seat.

Diane whispered to me in an embarrassed voice, "I thought I would die when you volunteered my services. I am *not* a registered nurse."

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I gave her a surprised look. "You said you were."

"No, *you* said I was, and I just didn't correct you. I hated to spoil your remarkable record of deductive reasoning."

"Oh," I said, somewhat deflated. After a moment of silence, I said, "Well, he doesn't need your services anyway." Then something suddenly struck me and I sat bolt upright.

"What's the matter?" Diane asked.

"I just watched Sergeant Copeland use a pen," I said in a low voice. "And guess what? He writes left-handed."

She looked at me blankly. "So?"

"So why did he have his left wrist shackled to the prisoner?"

After considering this, she said, "That *is* odd."

Still in a low voice I said, "Actually we have only Sergeant Copeland's word that he is the police officer and the other man is the prisoner."

Diane looked startled. "What are you getting at?"

I said, "The prisoner seems pretty suntanned for a convict who has been cooped up ten years. And the sergeant is remarkably pale. You might almost say he has a prison pallor."

In a slightly unsteady voice Diane said, "The prisoner escaped weeks ago. He could have acquired a tan. And it's not unusual for people who work in New York City to be pale."

"In an outside job like a cop's?"

After a period of silence she said, "If what you're suggesting is right, how did he ever work it?"

I pursed my lips and stared out the window at the clouds below until I had my thoughts organized. Finally I said, "Let's assume both men are left-handed. The real Sergeant Copeland would shackle the prisoner to his right wrist because his gun was strapped to his left side. My guess is that the liquid in that bottle labeled as a sweetener *is* some kind of poison and that Willie somehow managed to slip it into the sergeant's coffee. Willie simply waited until the sergeant was unconscious, then switched wallets with him, removed the man's holster from his belt and put it on his own, then dropped the bottle of poison into the sergeant's pocket. He unlocked the cuff from his own wrist, but left the other ring still attached, pulled the man out into the aisle and called the stewardess."

Diane said nothing for some time, merely thinking all of this over. Eventually she said, "Why would he deliberately call the doctor's attention to the poison?"

"Because he intends to brazen it

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out just as though he were Sergeant Copeland. No one in Buffalo knows what the sergeant looks like. When the patient arrives at the hospital and it is discovered he did not suffer a heart attack, but was poisoned, no suspicion will be cast on the so-called sergeant because he has already supplied an explanation. He can arrange for the Buffalo police to watch the prisoner for him until he either recovers or dies, then walk off and be halfway to Australia before anyone discovers the patient is really Sergeant Copeland."

"Unless the patient happens to regain consciousness en route to the hospital. Or even right after they pump him out."

"Yes, there is that possibility," I said thoughtfully. "Our pale friend may be insisting on riding along in the ambulance in order to make sure the patient doesn't regain consciousness. I wonder if we could get ourselves invited to ride in that ambulance too."

"Whatever for?" Diane asked in a startled tone.

"To make sure the so-called Sergeant Copeland doesn't have a chance to shut up the patient permanently."

"Wouldn't it be simpler just to phone the police from the airport, tell them your suspicions and have them meet the ambulance at the hospital?"

"The patient could be dead by then," I pointed out. "I really don't think it will be dangerous to ride along. The man isn't going to do anything to give himself away so long as he believes no one suspects him. And by the looks of the patient, he's not going to wake up en route, if ever. I just think our presence would be likely to deter any lethal designs the fake sergeant has. Are you willing to go along?"

"I suppose," she said reluctantly. "But how on earth will we get aboard the ambulance?"

"Leave that to me," I said with confidence. "They think you're a nurse, remember? And I never told them what I am."

Rising, I went back to the rear. The doctor was again leaning over the unconscious man, listening to his heartbeat with his stethoscope. He put it away and resumed his seat as I approached.

"No change," he said to his pale seatmate.

Halting, I said, "Doctor, I'm a medical student from U.C.L.A. and my companion is a registered nurse. We would be glad to ride along with you in the ambulance."

The pale man said, "Make it a little crowded, wouldn't it?"

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"Not really," the doctor said. "No one but the driver will be with the ambulance. There will be plenty of room."

I don't think the so-called Sergeant Copeland liked the idea, but he couldn't very well overrule the doctor. He gave a resigned shrug.

The ambulance was waiting when we landed at Buffalo Airport. Over the intercom the stewardess asked all passengers to keep their seats until the patient could be unloaded. Someone brought a litter, and Dr. Smith, the pale pseudosergeant and I lifted the unconscious man onto it. I volunteered to take one end of the litter, the pale man whom I was convinced was Willie the Parrot Doyle took the other, the doctor went ahead and Diane trailed behind us.

A couple of uniformed airport police were standing beside the ambulance. The ambulance driver was sitting in the cab with his back to us, and didn't even bother to get out. The rear door was already open. We loaded the litter, then the pale man introduced himself to the airport cops as Sergeant Copeland of the NYPD, introduced Dr. Smith and explained the situation. When the airport cops asked who Diane and I were, the doctor explained that we were his assistants and would be riding with him in the ambulance also.

One of the cops said, "Then I guess you've got a full house. One of us was going to offer to ride in with you."

"It won't be necessary," Dr. Smith assured him.

We all climbed in, and the doctor pulled the door closed behind us. We all sat on an empty litter next to the patient's, facing him, the pale man nearest the driver, then me, then Diane, and with Dr. Smith nearest the back door.

There was no partition between the cab and the rear of the ambulance, so that conversation could be carried on with the driver. Dr. Smith said, "All right, driver, we're all in."

The ambulance moved on, its red light blinking and its siren beginning to whine. Shortly after we pulled through the airport gate the siren cut off, though, and the reflection of the flashing red light suddenly stopped appearing alongside the road.

Diane said sharply, "Why are you turning north, driver?"

The driver made no answer. From the corners of my eyes I was conscious that Dr. Smith was unzipping his medical bag. My attention was primarily fixed on the pale man next to me, however, alert for any false move he might make.

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He made one. He was staring past me at the doctor when suddenly his right hand disappeared beneath his coat, then reappeared gripping a snub-nosed .38 Detective Special.

My reaction was a hangover from hand-to-hand combat training in the army. My left hand snaked out to clamp around the cylinder, preventing the gun from firing because the cylinder could not rotate. The edge of my right palm sliced down on the man's wrist. He emitted a yowl of pain and the gun came away in my hand.

"Thanks," the doctor said sardonically. "I think he was beating me to the draw."

I turned to look at him, and my jaw dropped. He was covering all of us with a .45 automatic he had taken from his bag. I gazed from it to the snub-nosed revolver I was uselessly gripping by the cylinder with my left hand. Then I looked back at the doctor.

"I don't understand," I said.

Sergeant Copeland was flexing his right fingers and rubbing his wrist. "I do," he growled. "I just tumbled when he started to pull that cannon from his medical bag. Dr. Smith is really Smooth Eddie Greene, and this fake heart attack was rigged as an escape plan."

"Right," the patient said, sitting up and removing the gun from my grip. "It was *sparteine sulphate* in that bottle, Sergeant. It has the temporary effect on the heart of making it beat slower, causing a slow, weak pulse. Probably wouldn't fool a doctor, but it makes a convincing enough heart attack to fool a layman." He looked at the fake doctor. "Why the devil did you bring along these two kids?"

"I thought some cops might be waiting to ride along, and there were. With them in tow, I had the excuse that there was no more room in the ambulance."

Sergeant Copeland said to me, "Do you mind explaining why you disarmed me, young man?"

I said sheepishly, "I thought you were Willie the Parrot and had switched places with the real sergeant. I'm sorry."

"What gave you that harebrained idea?" he asked curiously.

"Well, I saw you write left-handed, and you had been cuffed to the prisoner by your left wrist. Also you are so much paler than Willie. I thought it might be prison pallor."

"I'm ambidextrous and I shoot with my right hand," he informed me. "My pale complexion is because I'm on the homicide night trick."

"Oh," I said in a subdued voice.

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Willie the Parrot said to the driver, "All okay back here, Jim. Have any trouble?"

"No," the driver said. "The siren told me when the ambulance was getting close. I pulled out of the side-road and blocked the way with the panel truck just before he got there. When he stopped, I stuck a gun in his face. He's tied up in the back of that hot panel truck. We should be switched to the sedan and be a couple of hundred miles into Canada before anybody finds him on that side-road."

"Your kid brother Jim?" Sergeant Copeland asked Willie, jerking his head toward the driver.

"Uh-huh. We Doyles stick together."

"What are your plans for us, Willie?"

"Well now, Sergeant, what would you do in our position?"

I felt a chill crawl along my spine. I gave Diane an apologetic look. She smiled back at me bravely, but her eyes were brimming with tears.

Willie the Parrot glanced at Smooth Eddie, saw his gun was effectively covering us, and dropped the revolver into his coat pocket. The fake doctor's automatic rested on his knee, aimed past Diane in the general direction of me and the detective.

Diane made a sniffling noise. In a woeful voice she asked Smooth Eddie Greene, "May I get my handkerchief from my purse, please?"

"Sure, go ahead," he said generously.

Unsnapping her purse, she dipped her hand into it and brought out a snub-nosed revolver similar to Sergeant Copeland's. It was cocked and aimed at Smooth Eddie's head before he could even start to react. He froze.

In a flat, matter-of-fact voice too low to be heard by the driver, she said, "If you reach for your gun, Willie, I will have to put a bullet through Eddie's head, then shoot you. Eddie, set the safety, then very carefully hand your gun to me."

Eddie did as directed, very carefully. Diane relayed his automatic to Sergeant Copeland, leaned over to lift the revolver from Willie the Parrot's pocket and handed that to him also. The sergeant placed his own gun against the back of the driver's head. "Pull over, Jim," he ordered. "Then pass your gun back, butt first."

Jim did as directed.

Neither Sergeant Copeland nor I made any attempt to solve the mystery of how Diane happened to be carrying a gun until all

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three bank robbers were thoroughly under control. The sergeant cuffed Willie the Parrot's hands behind him, tied Smooth Eddie's behind him with his necktie, and used Willie's necktie on Jim, because the younger brother wasn't wearing any. When they were all loaded into the back of the ambulance and we three were standing behind it, the detective finally looked at Diane.

"I didn't know nurses carried guns, Miss Wharton," he said. "Particularly on planes, where it happens to be a federal offense."

"I'm not a nurse," she said. "I'm a policewoman. And, as you know, the airlines encourage police officers to carry their guns on flights as an added precaution against hijackers."

"A policewoman?" I said. "You're a cop?"

"Yes," she said in an oddly defensive tone. "Do you mind?"

"I think it's wonderful," I said. "It's always an advantage for a confidential investigator to have a friend on the force, and I can't think of a nicer friend to have."

"You may not feel that way when you learn what I did to you," she said ruefully.

"What's that?"

"I'll tell you later. We'd better get our prisoners down to police headquarters now."

"Yeah," Sergeant Copeland said. "This is all very interesting, but let's get moving. Can you drive this thing, Shelton?"

"Of course," I said.

"Then take the wheel and I'll ride guard in back. You can sit up front with him, if you want, Miss Wharton."

She took the offer. We rode in silence for some minutes before I finally said, "What was it you did to me?"

She didn't answer immediately, and when she did her tone was both apologetic and slightly apprehensive. "You're going to be mad at me. I put you on a little about your deductive talent."

"Oh? How?"

"I didn't exactly lie, but I gave you the impression that some of your deductions were correct by not saying anything, when actually they weren't."

"I see. Which ones?"

"Well, I wasn't vacationing in L.A. I was taking a summer course in criminalistics at U.C.L.A. I did spend some weekends at the beach, which is how I got my tan, but I got my nose sunburned playing tennis. Incidentally, I attended Fredonia State College, not the University of Buffalo."

I looked sidewise in surprise. "Then why are you wearing a U.

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of B. ring, if I may inquire?"

"It isn't mine," she said, taking it off to show me the string wound around its underside to make it fit because it was too large for her. "Around here, girls wear boys' class rings on their engagement fingers as a symbol of going steady."

"It isn't on your engagement finger."

"No," she said, replacing it on her right hand. "But it was when I left for the West Coast. He doesn't yet know I'm not still wearing it there."

"Oh, so your fiancé wasn't in Los Angeles after all. You broke the engagement by long distance."

"Not an engagement," she corrected. "Just going steady. I had been considering ending it all summer. It started going sour even before I left for summer school, and a couple of weeks ago I decided to break it off as soon as I got back home. But I hadn't run into anyone else out there who particularly interested me, so there wasn't much point in removing the ring."

"Then why did you?" I asked.

"I saw you admiring me when we were standing in line at the loading gate. I rather suspected you would like to sit beside me, and I thought seeing the ring might discourage you so I switched it to my right hand while we were waiting in line."

Her revelation that she had been laughing at me on the plane all the time I was posturing as a deductive genius hadn't made me angry at her, as she had expected, but it had considerably deflated my ego. Her statement that some of my deductions had been incorrect was more than kind. Actually, the only thing I had gotten right was that she was from Buffalo.

Now my ego suddenly inflated again, though, with her confession that she had been as instantly attracted to me as I was to her, and her contrition at having put me on sounded sincere enough to merit forgiveness.

Perhaps I was a total flop at the art of deduction, but it looked as though I might have a promising future in the art of seduction.

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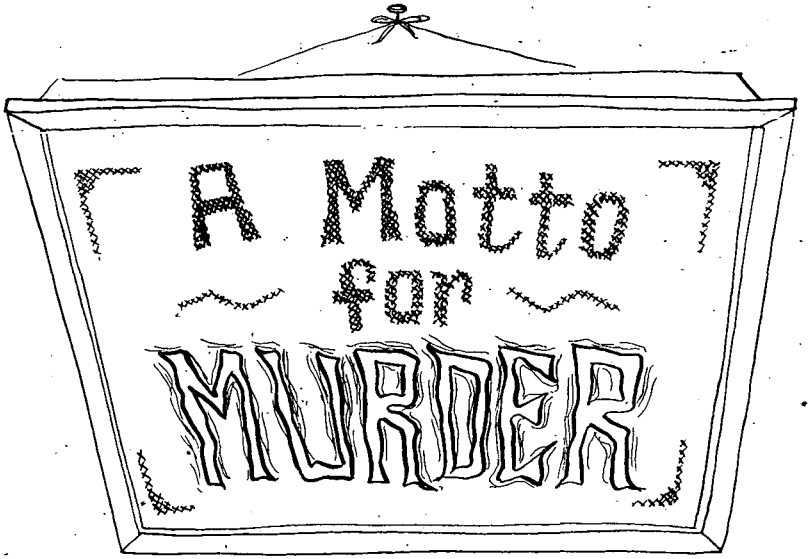
Seldom does a killer scatter clues so profusely, though there may be no help for it.



It was 12:30 and suddenly I was awake. I sat up straight and listened, as one will, for disturbing sounds in the night and heard nothing except for the soft and ordinary hum of light traffic on the more important street two blocks away.

Well, I am not one to keep my head on the pillow with my eyes wide open at the dark, so I got out of bed, slipped into slippers, belted my robe and padded into the kitchenette to heat a pan of milk with a little salt added. It's a very good stomach settler should one's stomach be out of whack, and I figure when one wakes up suddenly in the night, if it isn't a strange noise that has wakened one, it certainly has to be a guilty conscience or an upset stomach—and, believe me, my conscience is clear since I live according to the

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meaning of my given name, "Christine," which means *the Christian or Anointed.* So I got out the milk and reached for the salt.

(Of course, when I found out afterward what had happened, I suppose she must have cried out, and that's what really woke me up—but I didn't know about her then.)

I was standing there, stirring the pan, admiring my cross-stitched MILK OF HUMAN KINDNESS motto on the wall in the dim light of the stove when I heard the sound—a soft, slithery sound out in the hall.

I not only have remarkably good ears, but the walls in this apartment building are paper thin and even furtive sounds, when ev-

by Pauline C. Smith

erything else is quiet, bounce clearly from the bare hall floor to whisper against my kitchenette wall—and these were furtive sounds for sure; secret sounds, slipping, sliding, surreptitious sounds—the faint creak of a door, the soft click of the latch. I listened, holding my breath because the sounds, muffled with secrecy, were filled with a need to hide; and sounds from across the hall had never before sought to conceal their noise or intent. Instead, they had always rung out boldly, sharp and frank, hoping to shock my disapproving ears.

I listened then to the careful, retreating footfall, finally lost on the rubber treads of the stairs.

I turned out the flame, snapped off the light and fumbled my way through darkness to stand behind the curtains of the front windows and look down at the street, three stories below.

The man emerging from the apartment house entrance cast a long, diagonal shadow across the sidewalk. He hurried along the car-lined street and disappeared into one of the parked cars. I heard the engine start, a noisily suppressed self-conscious sound, and opened the window to sink down on my knees and lean out far enough so that I could see. The car remained dark while the driver maneuvered it from its closed-in parking space, the headlights and taillights not coming on until it entered the street and, minimally raucous, moved through the sleeping night; a little car, a bug, looking like a wind-up toy and sounding like one too.

The open window let in the cold, dry, still air. I rose from my

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knees and closed it, shivering, and hunched the collar of my robe against my throat, wondering if it were only the still night, the cold and isolated darkness that held me with icy apprehension . . . but no, there was something wrong, something very wrong in the quietly latched door and the softly hushed footsteps leading away from the apartment across the hall. I fastened the belt of my robe tighter and walked through the dark of my livingroom. I unlocked and opened the door just enough to give me a view of the closed door across the way, its brassy 3-A number vague in the dim light from the shaded bulb over the stairway.

I left my own door open and stepped across the hall.

Standing in the faintly brighter path of light from the crack under the door, I tapped lightly, then less lightly. The hall was quiet with soundless shadows. I pressed my face close to the door, so close that when I called "Kara," in barely a whisper, my lips brushed the wood.

The sound of my own voice startled me and I looked nervously over my shoulder toward the stairwell.

I turned the knob and the door came open with a sigh. I jumped and held my breath. Then I pushed the door open wider, looked upon the lighted room and let out my breath. It was untidy, but no more so than usual; littered as it always was, but not violently so. I reached out and rapped my knuckles against the open door, calling "Kara," softly.

No sound.

I stepped from the bare floor of the hall onto worn brown carpeting and wound my arms around myself, listening to nothing.

I moved into the room thinking that perhaps Kara was sleeping and the man had left her to sleep by leaving quietly—not furtively, after all.

The apartments in this building are simple and identical. A short corridor from the livingroom leads to the kitchenette and bathroom on the hall side, and on the other to a bedroom. I looked longingly back at the open door of escape just before I stepped far enough into the room to see down the corridor and the light spilling out from the open bedroom door.

I held my breath again. Would a man being cautiously quiet so as not to awaken a sleeper leave the light shining on a sleeper's closed eyes? "Kara," I whispered, my voice clogging my throat.

I moved down the corridor, hugged against the wall, and as I approached the lighted open door-

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way of the bedroom, I saw the dresser first, its top dusty with powder reflected in the mirror and the powder, like a light snowfall, whitening the brown earth-look of the carpet.

Another step showed me the foot of the bed, sheet and blankets tumbled into a messy heap.

"Kara," I said with my lips, my body pressed flat, the palms of my hands against the wall, sidling to reach the open doorway and look directly into the room and directly at the bed where Kara, propped against the pillows, lay

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staring sightlessly, her face a dull purple in the bright light.

I clapped a hand to my mouth to smother my own scream, and whirled, bumping the wall. I stumbled, half fell and staggered, still falling, through the short corridor that seemed miles long, away from the shaft of terrible light, into the livingroom.

I ran blindly, smashed into a chair and fell against the edge of the open hall door, swinging it so that I had to claw and grab before it closed and left me trapped with the thing in the bedroom.

Clinging to the door, my limbs leaden, I pushed it and myself to the hall—remembering then, with one slippered foot on the goal of the bare hall floor, that I had no phone in my apartment, and I *must* have a phone to get help over here . . .

Clutching the door, I reached and almost touched Kara's phone—almost, not quite. Breathing hard, my eyes darting, I let go of the door and lunged, crashing the table, knocking off the handset, and snatched at the cradle. I jerked it to the hall, crawling now, and set it on the bare floor, yanking at the cord to pull the receiver from the room. I hooked a finger around the edge of the door to bring it toward me and shut out what was behind it.

Then I knelt on the hall floor to dial.

Kara Mabry had lived across the hall from me for eight months, and now that the eight months are over and she is gone, I know that those were the happiest months of my life. Kara, so beautiful, so zestful, so joyful. Kara, whose name means *pure* so that I must believe her soul was innocent if her body was not.

She had laughed when I told her the meaning of her name. "Pure hogwash," she called it, but Kara was always laughing and making fun. It was her defense, as if she were the wayward daughter I'd never had, rebelling against the guidance of a virtuous mother she had never known.

I told her that once and she laughed then too, but she also leaned over and kissed my cheek.

I don't know a thing about her except for the few bits of information she occasionally dropped which may or may not have been truths. "She never spoke of any relatives, or friends either," I answered Lieutenant Riddle's question. "She said she was reared in foster homes and, after growing up, she jumped around from place to place, apparently not staying in any one place long enough to make friends."

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Except for me; I was her friend, despite all her scornful, high-handed defiance, but now and then she paid attention. "Your definition of sin, sweetie," she said when I stitched her a motto for her apartment wall, "your definition and mine are two different things. I bet you've never even known a man."

"Of course I have," I told her. "I knew my brother and father," and she laughed.

Lieutenant Riddle followed me into my kitchenette while I made coffee. It was late in the morning. Kara's body had been taken away and the fingerprint men and photographers had finished across the hall. "So I suppose," I told the lieutenant, "I knew her as well as anyone, but I don't know which man it was last night. He cast a long shadow in the street light, as if he might be tall, but then maybe anyone would at that angle. He drove one of those little cars, a little bug of a car that sounds like a child's worn-out toy . . . No, I couldn't tell what color it was, there wasn't enough light for that."

Lieutenant Riddle was looking at my MILK OF HUMAN KINDNESS motto over the stove. I have a number of these mottoes on the kitchenette walls, all pertaining to food for the inner man and the morality of his soul, such as CAST THY BREAD UPON THE WATERS and BY THEIR FRUITS YE SHALL KNOW THEM. "Are these your work?" he asked me.

"Yes," I said.

"And did you make those in the apartment across the hall?"

Life is terribly unfair. Had the opportunity been offered me to marry and have a daughter like Kara, I could have made of her a moral, upright woman, as beautiful in spirit as she was in feature—but when she came into my life eight months ago, I was too shy, too frozen within my inarticulate spinsterhood to do more than speak to her through cross-stitch messages.

"I tried to show her the error of her ways," I said stiffly.

She must have learned something about the Bible, however, at some time in her life, because after I made AMEND YOUR WAYS, OVERCOME EVIL WITH GOOD and THE WAGES OF SIN IS DEATH, she had told me that my definition of sin was different from hers, and I suppose it was. After that she said, with a derisive smile on her beautiful face, why didn't I make her some mottoes for her men friends . . .

Well, really!

"How many men regularly vis-

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ited Miss Mabry?" asked Lieutenant Riddle, sliding his eyes over my shoulder.

"Three," I said.

"Did you know any of them?"

I turned from the stove and gave him a straight stare. "Of course not."

"Well, I mean . . . were you ever introduced? Did you see them come or go? I mean, could you describe these men? Do you know anything about them?"

"No," I said, "no, and no," answering all his questions. The idea!

I poured the coffee and he followed me into the livingroom. "You see, Miss Lascher, all we have to go on is the fact that this man, the alleged murderer, left Miss Mabry's apartment shortly after 12:30 this morning, climbed into a 'little bug of a car,' your description, and took off. We can't check out the driver of every VW in the city, not to mention the Toyotas, Volvos and all the rest of the bugs, without even knowing what we're looking for. Miss Lascher . . ." The lieutenant placed his coffee cup on a table and bent in the middle, "we haven't a thing to go on except what you can tell us. Nothing." Then he sat and looked at me.

"What can I tell you?" I asked.

"Anything," he said. "Anything that Miss Mabry left out," and I jumped. "Well," he explained, "we looked through everything in her apartment, of course, and came up with nothing. No address book. No telephone numbers. No letters or names. We don't know where she worked . . . if she did."

"She said she was a model," I said.

He nodded. "Did she seem to have assignments?"

"She went out—sometimes—during the day, irregularly. Sometimes during the evening. She said she was modeling."

"Where?"

"I don't know where."

Kara was gone. There was nothing left of her. I could not remember the timbre of her voice, the lilt of her laughter. But it was always that way in my apartment, even when she was alive and I had just left hers; the essence of Kara seemed to dissolve in the hallway and disappear once I entered my own door, as if her warmth, her zest, had cooled and shriveled to nothing in the puritanical austerity of my home.

"These men, she must have said *something* about them, their names, where they lived, what they did for a living, something about their characteristics. All we've got are a bunch of smudged

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fingerprints, the sound of a car and a dead woman."

"I can't remember," I cried. "I can't even remember her." I shivered. "I can't remember her *here*. She was never here, here in this apartment . . ."

She had moved in noisily on a warm day in early April. I first saw her when I made the excuse to open my hall door as if I were looking for the paper: small, beautiful, radiating youth, energy and vitality, a girl like I wished I could have been—oh, no, a daughter such as one I wished I could have had and taught to be good. She wore shorts, hot-pants I believe they are disgustingly called, and a little thing on top that was shockingly revealing. From that very moment, even before I knew of her sinful ways, I wanted to lead her into the paths of righteousness.

"You see," I explained to the lieutenant, "I was always over *there*." Heavens! I certainly was! I tidied her apartment because she was so distressingly careless. I didn't think she ate right, if at all, so I cooked up good rich stews, tossed nice leafy salads and urged her to eat, all of which caused her to laugh. "I can't remember what she said or even what she was like because she isn't here, never was here . . ." and my apartment felt icy cold and devastatingly lonely.

"All right." The lieutenant stood. He had not even touched the coffee at his elbow. "Let's go across the hall. We haven't a thing to go on, no place to start. You're the only one who knew anything about her, so let's go to where you might be able to recall something that would help."

I hung back, remembering last night, when Lieutenant Riddle opened Kara's door and stepped aside. Then I walked in and he closed the door, and I remembered Kara.

Kara was all around me; her voice, her laughter, her derision and vulnerability. She sprawled on the couch, laughing at me and herself and the world, I suppose, as she said, "Your idea of sin, sweetie, and mine, are two different things . . ." and told me that her idea of sin was not how and what kind of love she found, but that she had to find any kind, wherever she could find it—and her idea of sin was not a few amateur photographers seeking kicks, and finding her, thus offering her a choice; but upright foster fathers whom she could not choose and from whose unfatherly love she always ran. I closed my eyes, remembering beautiful, cynical Kara—Kara, the pure, who had received the wages of a sin that

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was not of her own manufacture.

"Make a motto for him," she'd said, holding out a bracelet that I would not touch . . . I knew then that, at some time or another, in some foster home or many, under the tutelage of some upright foster father or more, she had been taught the Bible. "Stitch up 'The Lord called Samuel,' for the jeweler who brings me junk—and himself, God's gift to Kara."

" 'The Lord called Samuel, and he answered, here am I'?" I asked.

I walked around the room, remembering Kara while the lieutenant sat quietly, allowing me to remember. I moved toward the front windows where she had stood and said, "Stitch up 'Spreading himself like a green bay tree,' for the slob with a paunch. I tell him to run along beside his truck on the long hauls," she said, choking with laughter, "get some exercise. I tell him he's a hippo. One of these days," and she became thoughtful, "one of these days one of these guys won't take it anymore—and, like you say, the wages of sin will be death."

I shuddered. I had shuddered then. I shuddered now, for the wages of a lot of people's sins had been her death—but not the junk jeweler, God's gift to Kara—for he would have been too self-centered; and not the man who had "spread himself like a green bay tree," remembering the long thin shadow on the street below, a knife-blade of a man.

The lieutenant opened his mouth and closed it again as I moved stiffly around the room, among Kara's few belongings, among Kara's dreams—but no, she had had no dreams, for she was beyond dreaming after the foster homes that had crushed them all to leave her with stark and barren reality and imitations of love.

I stopped before the HONOR UNTO THE WIFE motto—the one I had made as positive advice since none of my negative suggestions had any effect . . . "Oh, I could marry," she had said defensively, with slight belligerence. "I could marry and settle down and be a Snowman's wife and have a bunch of little flaky kids . . ." She spoke with much slang I didn't understand.

"What is *flaky*?" I asked the lieutenant, who looked confused. "Flaky, a slang phrase," I explained.

"Well," he said, searching for a meaning, "to 'flake off' means 'get lost' . . ."

I shook my head. What was it she had said? ". . . have a bunch of little flaky kids spreading snow when the weather is cold and dry . . ." I closed my eyes tight and

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the tears squeezed through. I missed Kara and her strange chatter. I missed her with the terrible maternal spinster need for a daughter to love in answer to the need of a woman grown up without a mother; the shy affinity shown only through cross-stitched messages and a kiss on the cheek.

"A Snowman," I asked the lieutenant, "what is a Snowman?"

"Huh?" he said.

That is what she had called him, this one man of the three who had wanted to marry Kara, who had not wanted marriage but an imitation of love. "Look," she had said, "the slob, well all right, he's a slob with lots of fat, that's normal enough; so is God's gift to Kara—man-normal. But the Snowman . . ." and I had never seen such a look of distaste as the one then that held Kara's usual laughing face, "the Snowman drifts, and leaves parts of himself with me. Yech! And tonight will be cold and dry . . ."

The lieutenant became alert. "You mean she called one of those guys a Snowman? Are you sure it wasn't Snowbird?"

I shook my head impatiently, and didn't bother to listen while he tried to analyze the name of *Snowman*: "Maybe the guy's a junky. Let's see, a cocaine-morphine mixture is sometimes called snow, and they call, or used to call a user of cocaine or morphine a Snowbird. Maybe it was Snowbird she called this guy, and he was high and it was he you heard last night, right after he killed her and left . . ."

He was the one who killed her, all right. I knew that now. Not because he was what Lieutenant Riddle thought he was, but because, for some reason, it was a cold, dry night and Kara found him distasteful.

I walked down the corridor while the lieutenant stood at the hall opening, angry because I wouldn't concede him the name Snowbird and his analysis. He watched me, stony-faced, thinking, I knew, that I was nothing but an old biddy spinster, coming up with nothing, and getting my kicks only, as Kara would say, in this sinful apartment of death . . . "They were getting their kicks in a scroungy photographic studio . . ." I remembered her words, and looked back at the lieutenant.

"She found the men who came to visit her in the photographic studio where she modeled," I informed him, and his mouth dropped open as if he should have thought of that himself. "She told me so," I said. "I've read about those places in the newspaper. Shameful!" I pinned him with the

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accusing eyes of a decent citizen for the lax police work that did not close down such dens of iniquity.

In the corridor, where I had stood the night before, I looked in at the bedroom at the drift of powder still on the dresser. "It was at one of my foster homes that I saw this big box of dusting powder on the woman's dressing table," I recalled Kara saying. "Wow! All that powder and the big, fluffy puff, so I slapped it all over me; my face, my hair, my hands, my arms, loving the soft feel of it." She smiled, remembering—then she laughed without the smile, and added, "I got licked for that little trick, of course, but I swore to myself that once I was on my own I'd cloud myself with dusting powder forevermore. And I do." The powder was gone from the earth-brown rug, trodden in the worn nap by policemen feet, scuffed to a gray fog on the dark carpet except for a scattering of snowlike flakes. I was still able to hear Kara's voice: "I could settle down and be a Snowman's wife and have a bunch of little flaky kids . . ."

I stepped inside the bedroom and sank to my knees, peering closely at the flakes that had not been ground to a finer-than-powder dust; thin, shaving-like flakes, almost transparent. "On a cold, dry night, the Snowman drifts and leaves parts of himself with me . . ." I heard Kara say, and shuddered.

The lieutenant stood in the open doorway, looking down at me. "Well, what—" I heard him start to say, then I heard no more; instead, I was hearing Kara as she dropped the derisive remark, "He probably leaves snowdrifts all over the grease spots in his garage."

I leaned over the translucent flakes of skin on the carpet and, staring at the parts of himself the killer had left behind, I said to Lieutenant Riddle, "He met her at the studio where she modeled, and he works in a garage. His skin flakes off, especially during dry, cold weather. Last night was dry and cold. The man Kara called 'the Snowman' killed her."

The lieutenant squatted, steadying himself with the heel of one hand, to peer at the minute white snow shards. He laboriously picked up a piece of dry skin between his thumb and forefinger, where it was lost, and studied it. Then, teetering, he brought forth an envelope, and as I rose to my feet and left the bedroom, he was carefully dropping minute flakes into the envelope.

I loved Kara very much and

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through that love I heard, after her death, what I had not bothered to listen to when she was alive. Nor did I listen to Lieutenant Riddle very closely when he visited me much later to tell me that he had found the elusive Snowman.

"We found the studio," he said and cleared his throat. "We found the garage. The guy drives a VW. You were right about that too."

I didn't look up. I was busy stitching a motto.

"He has ichthyosis," said the lieutenant. "It's also called alligatorskin, fishskin disease, or xerosis, a condition that dates from birth and tends to run in families . . ." *I could marry the Snowman,* Kara had said, using her name for the killer, *and have a bunch of flaky kids . . .*

"Ichthyosis," said the lieutenant, "affects only the outer layer of the skin, which presents rough, fishlike scales, bluish-red in color—rarely attacking, fortunately, the face, hands, or feet; nor does it injure the general health except where the ability to perspire is lessened and the afflicted person becomes feverish . . ." *One of these days,* Kara had said, *one of these guys won't take it anymore—and, like you say, the wages of sin will be death.*

"Cold weather and dry air make the condition worse," said the lieutenant, "and it was dry and cold that night, so he left his skin scales all over the place; we just didn't see the clues with all the powder . . ." *The Snowman drifts, and leaves parts of himself with me,* Kara had said. *And tonight will be cold and dry.*

I looked up as the lieutenant said, "I see you are working on another motto."

"Yes," I answered, and spread out the cross-stitched EYE FOR EYE text from Exodus. "It is not only for the Snowman, but also for all those who came before, the sinners for whom my Kara collected the wages," and I looked at the motto which, when finished, will read: EYE FOR EYE, TOOTH FOR TOOTH, HAND FOR HAND, FOOT FOR FOOT . . .

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A terrible party often has a considerable number and variety of leftovers.

Danver Hopkins awoke and realized fuzzily that it wasn't worth it; not this morning.

The pillow under his head was damp from a long night's sweat. The frontal lobes throbbed. His nose seemed to be clogged with wet cotton. The interior of his mouth was scorched from the left gumline to the far right, with a desiccated tongue lying dead in the middle. In order to see the shambles that he suspected must be spread on all sides, he tried to open his eyes, but only the left one responded properly. The other was like (he shuddered) a soft-boiled egg in a broken shell.

What the hell happened here? he asked himself.

The answer teetered perilously on the spongy cliff of semi-consciousness. He backed away from it, afraid. He matched the good eye, the fairly good eye, with the bad one by closing it. In the pink haze behind the lids danced a warped image of Margaret, and of David Apgar too; of Margaret and David, intimate and absurd, with Pauline Apgar momentarily luminous in the background and then fading against the simpering intrusion of Malcolm Foster.

Purple people-eaters; are they still here?

The tiniest part of the answer

by Frank Sisk

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peered from a shadowy crevice of his mind, then withdrew.

Margaret, he called silently.

Exercising great willpower, he turned his sweaty head toward Margaret's bed and forced the good eye to open narrowly. The sunlight lay on the taut blue spread like a puddle of fresh water dammed in place by the jacquard configurations. The bed was empty. It hadn't been disturbed all night. The digital clock on the table beside it flipped out a new minute: 11:39.

Closing his eye against the scratching burr of sunlight, he tried to postpone wondering what had happened, but the pictures were there—fragmented, perhaps, yet essentially indestructible, ready to reform and move at a given impulse.

With a start, he thought he almost saw something.

"Margaret," he said in a hoarse whisper that he hardly recognized as his own. "Margaret," the strange voice called out. "Peg, honey, where are you?"

Finally he got out of bed. On his feet, he felt drained and dizzy. He was still wearing black socks of executive length and nothing else. Against the black his flesh looked dankly white and vulnerable. He couldn't seem to recall a single detail of going to bed. For the past week he had been consuming booze in wholesale quantities; now the memory of everything was tilted at surrealistic angles and painfully shot through with a shimmer of cock-eyed colors.

He began to recall vaguely a few crazy moments of last night's cocktail party. Was it last night? Or the night before? Anyway, he had a feeling that the party had been a total fiasco, and worse.

As he made his naked way to the master bathroom, lurching unmasterfully a bit to the left, the question that kept beating away at him like a strobe flash from a brain tumor was why in hell had he arranged the damned party in the first place. He must be some kind of simpleminded masochist, inviting his wife's lover over to sip and sup. Knock knock, who's there? David Apgar and Margaret Hopkins, the secretive pair, that's who's there.

It amused him to observe how they pretended, as always, that they were just neighborly friends or friendly neighbors, nothing more. They put on a good act of guarded politeness so transparently phony that it failed to deceive even Pauline Apgar, the beautiful but dumb, the dreary, the drag. To console her (or himself), he'd made a couple of

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clumsy passes at her over the past month, only to be stupidly rejected by a banal watchword: "I'm not like that, Danver."

Not like what, you silly broad?

"Something inside won't let me out of line."

Call it *lack* of something—imagination, curiosity, or plain humanity.

"No matter what, I can't. Ever."

Thus spake the poor prosaic watcher of afternoon TV. Hence, unfaithful David Apgar was eating his cake and also having it.

In front of the bathroom mirror Danver Hopkins stared without real recognition at Danver Hopkins. Somehow he didn't quite look like himself. The clown in the mirror wore a face of disaster. It was a mottled face, a puffy face, a scratched and stupid face. The one good eye was yellowish and skeined with red. The big fool's nose was faintly purple. The thick dry lips were the unhealthy brown color of hamburger left too long uncovered, with a similar texture.

Holy Moses, who is this guy? And what have they done to him?

Then, all at once, he detected the basic cause of his alteration. This dizzard, gaping through one eye from the mirror, was Danver Hopkins without his luxurious beard. Some son-of-a-bleep had clipped his whiskers while he slept. The growth that had gradually created an incognito for his bare face was now, by its sudden absence, subsuming another alien, a hairless oddball with a beat-up phiz, a wavering reflection without dependable recollection.

Whoever had shorn away the hirsute mask was nō expert. The results were rather a mess. A cluster of bristles sprouted from the cleft of chin. Islets of black hair pocked the pallid jowls. The long upper lip, white as the underbelly of a dead fish, bore two jagged nicks from a reckless razor.

Who done it? It was a mystery minus clues.

A thick fog seemed to be clinging to the ridges of his forehead, obscuring even the immediate moment. Perhaps a needlepoint shower would dispel it.

He sat on the fluffy blue cover of the toilet seat. The removal of the knee-high socks became a great task. Several times a vertigo nearly pitched him forward, headfirst. At last, standing straddle-legged and flat-footed, he moved toward the somewhat opaque plexiglas shower door with the rolling gait of a sailor contending with a heaving deck. He pulled the door open.

Pauline Apgar, fully clothed,

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was inside. She was sitting on the floor in a posture of spinelessness, wearing one of his neckties, Danver Hopkins noticed. It was slip-knotted tight into the throat, and the insipidly pretty face was an electrifying blue against the yellow tiles.

Terrible. He stepped back. *Terrible. What a terrible party it must have been.*

Suddenly, as if in spite of himself, he began remembering, perhaps a bit askance but nevertheless remembering . . .

Let's see. The Apgars had arrived around five the previous evening. Their arrival had interrupted Margaret's everlasting protest against his next drink. He was experimenting with a new version of Scotch and soda—25 percent more Scotch and 25 percent less soda—when the Apgars (one or the other, most likely Pauline) rang the bell.

"Don't you think you ought to coast, Dannie?" Margaret was saying as she puttered over an hors d'oeuvres paste. "Like for a month maybe."

A lobster paste, that was it. Or shrimp. Or maybe it was clam dip. Who the hell cares?

Between the ringing of the bell and the actual presence of the Apgars within the walls of the house, the memory of those damned hors d'oeuvres occupied an unconscionable long period of time. Afterward, when the Apgars had been served cocktails, many cocktails no doubt, all that he really recalled was miles of smiles—forced smiles, facile smiles, grotesque smiles, bored smiles, even a few painful smiles mostly from himself as observed interiorly—but not a word of talk. Hours must have elapsed.

Then came Malcolm Foster, uninvited, from the house next door. "My own guests have gone," he announced with an apologetic simper, "and I can't bear the thought of retiring yet." With wrist daintily bent, he consulted his watch. "It's only five of twelve, darlings. The night is young. May I mix myself a rum swizzle?"

So whatever happened must have happened after 11:55, or probably much later. In Danver Hopkins' mind dwelt a flickering image of Malcolm mixing a second rum swizzle and possibly a third. Also he seemed to hear him repeating and then echoing the details surrounding the successful baking of an upside-down cake made from unadulterated—"do not homogenize"—buttermilk. "Obtain it from Foley's Farm . . . from Foley's Farm . . . from . . ."

At the moment the thought of

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anything upside down and full of buttermilk stirred nausea in Danver Hopkins.

By now he had left the bathroom and was wandering foggily around the bedroom in search of something. A pair of yellow nylon shorts lay on the rug at the foot of Margaret's bed. That's what he was looking for. He picked them up. Grasping the back of the chair in front of Margaret's dressing table, he entered the shorts one leg at a time.

Margaret, he kept thinking, *where are you? Why do you permit a guest to hang around inside the shower? Dead.*

It was only then that the horrible reality of the situation penetrated the sponginess of his brain.

Now, where's Margaret? Is she with Apgar—the two-timing hypocrite—while his own wife lies . . .

He needed fresh air. He went to the closed French windows, wondering why they were closed on such a warm day, and opened them. He stepped out on the cork-cushioned sundeck. The soft scent of the little garden below—tulips and roses and larkspur—revived his spirits. The sun appeared to be riding a cloudless sky at high noon. It caused his good eye to water. He closed it and opened it again to look at the soothing greenness of the lawn.

Malcolm Foster was lying on his side near the swimming pool. He was still wearing the powder-blue slacks he'd worn last night. His legs were widely separated as if he'd fallen in mid-stride en route to the break in the tall hedge that separated his house from the Hopkins'.

Poor freaked-out fag, Danver Hopkins mused, and then the actuality of what had happened last night, late last night, came back to him in a terrifying rush.

Oh, yes. He shuddered. Yes, yes, yes. No.

It must have been about two o'clock. He remembered it clearly now. Malcolm was coming from the kitchen with his third rum swizzle. It usually took him an hour to finish a drink, so it must have been about two.

He said, "Look what the cat dragged in," his voice even more swishy than normal.

Behind him, towering over him, was a wild-eyed man, somebody none of them knew.

"Who he?" David Apgar asked, smiling his perpetual smile.

Pauline was not present. Danver Hopkins was sure of this. A moment earlier she had left the room.

Malcolm moved mincingly forward, exaggerating the mannerism, rum swizzle in hand, a silly grin

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stamped on his face. As he reached the center of the room it was instantly obvious that what was troubling him was an enormous carving knife which the stranger was holding at his back.

"Stop it!" Margaret commanded.

The two-man procession stopped. Malcolm, flimsy little Mal, had the guts to raise the glass to his lips and take a big swallow.

"Hey, man," David Apgar said blearily, taking a sip of his own drink. "Fun 'n games."

"Now hear this," the stranger intoned. "Now hear this."

"I'll drink to that," David Apgar said.

"Now you hear this," the intruder shouted angrily. "Once and for all, one and all alike, hear this. I mean, hear this. Now hear this."

The man was patently a lunatic escaped from an asylum. He ranted and raved. He listed a ridiculous set of demands with an incoherence that resisted sensible understanding. Not for money. For what? Nobody quite knew. The knife talked with flashing emphasis. It underlined, it truncated, its rhythms were fascinatingly undeniable. No matter how garbled the man's verbal message was, the knife's silent utterances conveyed a shining, indubitable simplicity.

Finally somebody present grew weary of the meaningless harangue. Himself? No. Apgar, then? Yes, it must have been Apgar, drunk as he was and full of Dutch courage—and that was that. That's all he cared to remember.

Like a man being led on a leash, Danver Hopkins turned from the sight of the late Malcolm Foster and left the sundeck. He crossed the bedroom. He opened the door. In his bare feet he moved along the thick, ticklish carpeting of the balcony that overlooked the livingroom. He descended the stairs. Over near the red leather lounge, David Apgar lay facedown in a brown stain on the beautiful white rug. Margaret was in the kitchen. She was kneeling in front of a chair with her head resting on the seat.

Danver Hopkins went to the phone on the kitchen counter and dialed O. When the operator answered, he said, "Connect me with the police, please."

As he waited he realized that the first thing the police would want was a description of the man.

Well, he would say, he was about my size and build and he wore a well-kept black beard.

Then he did remember it all.

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Perhaps one may learn a little too much from his mentor.

The Last Man

The big jet settled like some great sea gull onto the runway at Heathrow Airport, then braked to a gradual stop as the arrivals bus came out to meet it. The Frenchman stared out the plane window, but there was little to see of British soil in the morning mist.

He passed through customs without difficulty, listing himself as a businessman dealing in men's wear. No one asked him to open the overnight bag he carried, and the metal detector at Orly had failed to register enough steel from the dozen-odd pieces into which his pistol was broken down. The plastic explosive, of course, did not register at all on the device.

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He could have been a plane hijacker or a terrorist bound for Northern Ireland. He was neither.

The Frenchman's name was Jacques Crecy, but it was many years since anyone had called him that. Thirty years ago, when he'd been an eighteen-year-old boy during World War II, he'd gone to fight with the Resistance after his parents and brother had died in the bombings. Then, back in those days so long ago, he'd still been Jacques, still a person with a name of his own.

However, the British paratrooper named Simpson, a cool, calculating commando who'd trained them behind the lines, had somehow taken his name away while he taught him the art of killing. The Frenchman often wondered what had happened to Simpson after the war, what use he might have made of his vast knowledge of the American explosive known as Composition C-2.

For the Frenchman, that practiced expertise in the art of plastic bombs had served him well over two decades. There were a great many men in the world willing to pay a great deal of money for his art. A gray, puttylike glob of *plastique* packed around the axle of a staff car in Algiers, or stuck against the wall of a police station in Paris, was a commodity to be traded as certainly as the grape harvest from Bordeaux.

He had worked first with the F.L.N. in North Africa, and later with the O.A.S. in Paris, because the pay was better. He was, he supposed, something of a soldier of fortune—though others might just as easily consider him a terrorist for hire. The days in Paris had been dangerous ones, but not without their rewards. The girl, Marta, a double agent who may at last have betrayed the leaders to the police, had allowed him to escape the Gaullist trap.

Now Paris was behind him, and London beckoned. It would be a different sort of life, a different sort of danger. He was anxious to reach his hotel, and he hired a taxi for the fourteen-mile journey into the city, traveling through a mist-shrouded countryside that yielded only gradually to the semidetached houses on the city's outskirts.

It was still early, before ten a.m., when the Frenchman checked into his hotel on Park Lane. He took a few moments to

by Edward D. Hoch

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assemble the pistol, though he did not expect to use it. The British laws were too stiff on possession of a gun.

No pistol. He would use the *plastique*, as he always had.

London in mid-June was a city of brightly cloudy skies and temperatures that climbed regularly into the low seventies. People could venture out-of-doors without their traditional umbrellas, relatively secure from the threat of a sudden rain. The girls of the city had abandoned their coats to reveal slim mini-skirted legs, and lovers strolled hand-in-hand through Hyde Park.

The Frenchman liked what he saw as he strolled along toward a back street not far from the hotel, and entered a basement gambling club called the Spinning Wheel. The main room of the casino had a score of tables equipped for roulette, blackjack and dice, and behind a screen there was a baccarat setup as well.

The place was empty now, except for a tired cleaning woman who eyed him questioningly. "Ernie O'Bern?" he asked.

"Behind the screens," she gestured.

He noticed that an overhead light still burned over the baccarat table. He pushed aside the traditional screens that granted privacy to the players and saw a big red-faced Irishman sitting alone, counting through piles of pound notes.

"Ernie O'Bern?" he asked again, speaking quietly.

The big man jerked nervously, his fingers starting toward the button at the table's edge. Then he relaxed. "You must be the one they call the Frenchman."

"Yes."

"You speak English well."

"The British taught me that during the war. That, and other things."

O'Bern nodded. "You come highly recommended."

"I do the job," the Frenchman said.

"I understand you use plastic bombs."

"*Plastique*, yes. Tell me what you need done."

"There's a man named Charles—they call him Mr. Charles—who's moved in fast on the London gambling casinos. He started out getting a cut from the penny gambling machines in Battersea Park, but that wasn't enough to satisfy him. Now he has opened two gambling clubs near Battersea, and he's building a third. A lot of money is going across the river these nights."

"Enough to bother you?" the

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Frenchman asked. "With nearly nine hundred clubs in the London area?"

"Mr. Charles wants it all. He killed my partner last week—I'm sure of it. Dumped his body in the Thames at high tide. It's getting to be like American gangsters over here! We have to teach Charles a lesson, and quickly."

"I'm no hired killer," the Frenchman said. "Until now, my work with plastic bombs has always been in the nature of warfare."

Ernie O'Bern smiled slightly. "Warfare? In Paris? Some would call that terrorism. Nevertheless, I do not want anybody killed if it can be avoided. Charles has two casinos over at Battersea, as I've said. I want you to bomb the smaller of the two, just as a warning. Perhaps that will be enough."

"That will be enough," the Frenchman agreed. "I do a thorough job." He lit an American cigarette and chuckled a bit. "So the Irish are once again at war with the English."

Ernie O'Bern nodded. "Back in 1920 we imported American gangsters from Chicago to assassinate English magistrates and policemen. They came by ship, of course, and we paid them one thousand U.S. dollars."

"What are you paying me?"

"A thousand pounds for the Battersea Club. More, if other work is needed."

"Good."

The Irishman stood up, locking the pound notes away in a metal box. "Can I do anything else to make your stay a pleasant one? A woman, perhaps?"

He thought of Marta, whom he'd left back in Paris, and nodded. "Perhaps. I will need the *plastique*, too. I understood you would furnish it."

"I will furnish it."

They shook hands and the Frenchman went back to his hotel.

The girl came that evening, a little before ten. She was small and just a bit shy, with big brown eyes and firm breasts. As she undressed, she handed him a package. "He said to give you this."

The Frenchman unwrapped it carefully. He saw the familiar gray mass of putty, its components mixed together to form a stable, moldable compound. In this form, it could be hit with a hammer without exploding. Detonation was by fuse or electricity, and the Frenchman used both methods, depending upon the circumstances.

"He must trust you a great deal," he told the girl. "What's

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your name, what shall I call you?"

"Joyce," she said. "Do you have a name, ducky?"

"I had one. A long time ago some people called me Jacques."

"Have you killed many people?"

He walked to the window and stared out at the London lights. "In war. Only in war."

"I knew Gastor."

"Gastor?" He turned toward her, questioning.

"O'Bern's partner. The man Mr. Charles killed."

"Oh."

"He was a good man, never harmed anyone. Mr. Charles shouldn't have done it."

"You have many killings like this, Joyce?" he asked.

"Lately, yes. It's this legalized gambling. It's brought in a great deal of foreign money."

She knew more about it than he cared to hear just then. He took her to bed with him, and though it was not satisfactory for either of them, at least she stopped talking.

The Battersea Club was located at the edge of the park, facing the Fun Fair with its familiar rides and games and amusements. As the Frenchman crossed Albert Bridge and came upon it all at once, he marveled that this playground for adults should face one for children, separated only by a grassy park and a few trees. He watched the fountains at Battersea for a time, and strolled along the river, trying to kill the minutes until darkness would descend on the city; but at this time of the year, darkness might never come to the northern latitudes. Finally, just at dusk, he entered the club. It was already after ten o'clock.

The most common thing would have been a pound of *plastique* placed beneath the roulette wheel, where it would have gone off with a roar and closed down the club at once—but it would also have almost certainly killed several of the well-dressed men and women who stood about with their little handfuls of chips.

He chose instead the upstairs men's room, which he determined was just above the main gambling room. He packed the plastic bombs quickly but carefully around the sink and toilet fixtures, removing them from inside his shirt as he worked. They had been molded to fit his body, but it was a simple job to reshape them. He used two short fuses and walked away fast.

Just as he reached the bottom of the stairs, the whole building seemed to shudder. Women screamed and men ran, perhaps

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remembering the German bombings now almost thirty years past. At the second shudder, the entire ceiling gave way, and burst water pipes sent a virtual deluge on the throng of guests below. House men scattered, people belatedly clawed at their chips, and one

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man was even seen scooping up bills in the cashier's cage. The whole scene was a nightmare—a wet, soggy nightmare. What the explosions had not done, the burst water pipes finished. There was no fire, but within five minutes the Battersea Club was reduced to near ruin.

The Frenchman was halfway to the street when suddenly he came face to face with a balding, middle-aged man who'd come running from the opposite direction. In that instant of recognition, the Frenchman seemed to freeze to the spot, forgetting even the thought of escape. It had been more than thirty years since last they'd met, but there could be no doubt of it—the man facing him was the commando Simpson, who'd taught him all he knew about plastic bombs.

Simpson started, recognizing him only an instant later. "Why . . . why it's Jacques, isn't it? Jacques, after all these years!"

"Simpson . . ."

Then, as the revelation dawned, the balding man's face twisted into an expression of genuine hatred. "You did this to me!" he shouted, gesturing at the shattered Battersea Club from which employees and guests were still streaming. "I taught you everything I knew, and you did this to me!" His arms were waving wildly.

"To you?" the Frenchman asked, still not understanding.

"This is my club. I'm Mr. Charles."

"I-I couldn't know! I . . ."

If Simpson had been carrying a gun, the Frenchman was certain he would have used it. Instead, they only stood in the driveway of the Battersea Club facing one another, while the moment of murderous fury passed.

Then Simpson said, "Tell that Irishman I'll kill him for this. And as for you, Jacques, get out of London tonight, and never come back. If you're still here tomorrow, I'll come after you. I'm still pretty good with the stuff myself. I taught you, remember? A small charge where you least expect it—enough to blow off your hands, or maybe a leg."

At that moment, the Frenchman knew fear. "I didn't know it was you," he said again.

"You know now. Get out tonight, or I'll come after you!" Then Simpson was gone, running toward a man in a tuxedo who had just emerged from the club.

The Frenchman waited no longer. He trotted across the street, losing himself in the park. Though it was late, the Fun Fair was still crowded. He mingled with the strollers, but even the

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bright lights and the noise did nothing to sap the tension which had built inside him.

The girl, Joyce, was in his hotel room when he returned to it. She was sitting by the window smoking a cigarette, and she turned as he came in. "You look as though you've seen a ghost."

"I have, in a way. What do you know about this Mr. Charles? Who is he, really?"

"Nobody knows too much, ducky. He was in the war, like everyone else. Something of a hero, I think. Some linked him with the big train robbery a few years back, but it was never proved. They say he took money from that to start these gambling clubs."

"What's his full name?"

"Nobody ever calls him anything but Mr. Charles. I think his last name is Simpson, though. Something like that. Why?"

"I knew him, a long time ago."

"Oh. And he saw you there?"

The Frenchman nodded.

"Did you blast the place? Really blast it?"

"Yes."

"Good. Ernie will be pleased."

"Could you reach him for me tonight? Now? Tell him I need some money. Tell him I have to leave the country."

Joyce only smiled. "Oh, you can't leave now! You're the best thing that ever happened to us. I'm sure Ernie has lots more work for you, ducky."

"Call him. Tell him I want to see him, up here. Now."

She frowned at him, but did as he said.

Twenty minutes later, Ernie O'Bern knocked at the door. He seemed in a good mood and he brought out a cigar as he relaxed in a chair opposite the bed. "You did good work. The word's all over town already. The Battersea Club's out of business."

"I need the money," the Frenchman told him. "I want to get out of London tomorrow morning."

"Tomorrow! Why?"

"I ran into Mr. Charles and he recognized me. He knew me back during the war."

"So? We'll get you out of here and put you up at a smaller hotel. He'll never find you."

"Why can't I just go?"

"Because there's more work to be done, friend! You're an expert with the plastic. In one month I can be king of this town. I can put all the big places out of business and have the customers flocking to me."

"What about Mr. Charles?"

O'Bern pursed his lips, thinking

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about that. "We have to get rid of him first. I told you he had another place. It's just down the street from the Battersea. Do the same sort of job there."

"I'd never get near it. He'd recognize me."

"There are ways," O'Bern assured him. "No one knows you but Charles?"

"No."

"Then we will pick a time when he's away."

"I don't know. I don't know if I want to do it . . ."

"If you put Mr. Charles out of business, the money will be very good. Very good indeed."

"Let me think about it," the Frenchman told him. "Go away and let me think about it."

After the gambler had left, he sat for a long time by the window with Joyce, trying to piece together the puzzle of his life. Until now he had been a soldier of fortune. He could deceive himself with the half-fiction that the causes for which he fought were worthy, noble causes. Now, however, faced with O'Bern's proposition, it became something else entirely—little more than a gang war, aimed at the Englishman who had taught him all he knew.

"What do you think about it?" he asked Joyce. Even though he hardly knew her, somehow she seemed to have the most sense.

"Mr. Charles killed Gastor," she replied. "That's all I know."

"Were you in love with O'Bern's partner?"

"I suppose so. He hardly knew I existed, but I suppose I was in love with him."

"Then you want me to go after Charles?"

"Yes."

He nodded. That was it, then. With decisions like these, you either didn't make them at all or you relied on the opinion of a prostitute.

They were awakened in the morning by a knocking at the door, and he opened it to see a youth from room service bearing a covered tray. "Breakfast, sir," he said, lifting the lid to show orange juice, coffee and a dish of Bath buns.

"We didn't order any."

"Compliments of Mr. O'Bern."

The Frenchman allowed the tray to be placed in the room, and then shook Joyce to awaken her. "Your boss sent breakfast," he said.

She opened groggy eyes and peered at it. "First time *he* ever thought about breakfast!"

The Frenchman drank his orange juice and reached for one of the large hard rolls that the Brit-

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ish called Bath buns. As his fingers closed around it, he saw the tiny crack where it had been broken apart.

"Duck!" he shouted, and hurled the thing at the open window.

It exploded halfway to the ground, making a loud pop like a giant firecracker.

"Heavens! What was it?"

The Frenchman came away from the window, not answering immediately. There were three other buns on the tray, and one of those had been tampered with, too. This time he was careful, working it apart at the crack without applying pressure.

"See?" he showed her. "Sliced open and hollowed out. Just space enough for one small flashlight battery, a clamp, and a bit of *plastique*. It weighs just a bit more than the others, but by the time you pick it up, the current has made contact with the explosive. The first one was a bad connection, or I'd have lost a few fingers."

"How terrible! But that's not enough to kill someone?"

"He didn't aim at killing me. Not this time."

"Who?"

"Mr. Charles—or Simpson, as I knew him."

"You'll do it now? You'll go after him?"

He stared out at where the Bath bun had exploded. "Yes. I have to, now. If I leave London, he'll know he's won. He taught me about plastic bombs, but I think today I know more than he does. I'll have to, in order to stay alive."

The Frenchman went back to Battersea Park that evening, strolling along the Thames embankment as the excursion boats drifted past. He went to one of the booths at the Fun Fair and purchased a large stuffed animal, a purple cow with a bizarre smiling face. After a time he headed for Mr. Charles' headquarters.

That was the Blue Thames Club, and was in truth only a block from the Battersea. It was larger, and a bit older, than the other club. It had obviously existed first in time, and its layout of roulette wheels and dice tables reminded the Frenchman of the casino at Monte Carlo, where he'd visited once. Although, of course, Monte Carlo had no blackjack tables.

He moved through the main room, still only half filled at this early evening hour. Under his arm he carried the large stuffed cow he had purchased. He was hardly surprised when two burly men in tuxedos approached him.

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"Mr. Charles wants to see you," one said.

"Of course."

They took him upstairs to a large office where Simpson waited behind a kidney-shaped desk. The balding man eyed him with open suspicion and barked, "Take that . . . animal away from him!"

"No, no," the Frenchman cautioned, hugging the stuffed cow tighter under his arm. "It might explode, you know, and flood the place with milk."

"No jokes," Simpson said, leaning forward across the desk. "I thought my little Bath bun would convince you I was serious."

"Send these two away so we can talk."

Simpson eyed the stuffed animal and then waved them away. "I'll buzz if I need you. Wait outside."

They settled down opposite each other, Simpson and the Frenchman, and it might have been thirty-odd years earlier, when a British commando was instructing an eighteen-year-old youth in the arts of warfare. "You trained me too well," he told Simpson.

"I can see that. Now I'm going to have to kill you."

The Frenchman loosened his grip on the animal. "I could blow this entire place to bits right now."

"And destroy yourself with it?"

"If necessary."

Simpson sighed and dropped his eyes to the desk. "Why did you start this? You're working for the Irishman, of course, but why? Only for the money?"

"You started it, Mr. Charles, when you killed his partner, Gastor."

"He told you that? He told you I killed Gastor?"

"Of course."

Simpson opened a folder and slid a contract of some sort across the desk. "Gastor was coming in with me. Here's proof—a signed contract. Ernie O'Bern killed him to prevent it."

"Can I believe that?"

The balding man shrugged. "I would have had no motive."

"All right," the Frenchman said, and in that moment he did believe him. "Where does that leave us?"

Simpson sighed. "I think I still have to kill you," he said quietly. "You're too good with that stuff. I'd never feel safe."

They might have been discussing the weather, or the state of the latest world crisis. "How will we decide which of us is best?" the Frenchman asked.

"Suppose a duel."

"With *plastique*?"

"Why not? Tomorrow night? In

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Battersea Park, near the fountain?"

"What time?"

Simpson thought about it. "Ten-thirty. Just after dusk. There'll still be enough light to see by."

"Just us two alone."

"Us two alone. As it was back in the war."

The Frenchman nodded. At the door, he turned. "Let me keep a copy of your contract with Gastor."

"Why not? It's no good to me."

He took the paper and left the purple cow in its place on the desk. "Play with it," he said. "There's no *plastique* inside."

"Damn you!" Simpson said.

"Tomorrow night . . ."

The Frenchman spent the following morning searching London stores. Guy Fawkes Day wasn't till November, but he found what he needed.

For a time he debated taking the pistol with him, but finally decided against it. If the explosions attracted the police before he could get away, the pistol in his possession could easily be dangerous. "Put it back in the drawer," he told Joyce.

"Ernie says there's a thousand pounds for you if you kill Mr. Charles tonight."

He nodded. "I'll try to collect it. Wait for me. I won't be long."

He took a taxi to Albert Bridge, arriving just after ten. As he walked across the bridge to the park, he tried to form some sort of plan, to tune in on the thoughts that would be running through Simpson's mind right now.

Simpson had trained him in a sort of commando warfare, using plastic bombs as booby traps, letting the enemy find them and destroy himself. There was little doubt in the Frenchman's mind that Simpson would follow the same technique tonight; but *plastique* could not be detonated by merely stepping on it. A fuse was impractical, and that left only an electrical detonation of some sort.

He saw Simpson almost at once, standing alone by a large rock. The park was nearly in darkness, but there were a few strollers out, mainly clustered near the fountains where colored lights played over the water. No one was near enough to them to be injured.

"Hello," Simpson called out. "We meet for the last time."

"Yes." His mind was jumping ahead. Simpson could not risk a series of explosions, for surely that would bring the police too soon. It had to be done with one blast, or two at the most. Simpson had to maneuver him into exactly the right position.

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He moved forward slowly, arms at his sides, watching Simpson for any sudden motion. He was especially careful to keep away from trees and stones—anything which could serve as a landmark for a buried bomb.

They circled each other at a distance of some fifty feet, never closer, each seeking the advantage. To anyone observing them, they might have seemed insane, but their actions were deadly serious. The Frenchman realized he was being maneuvered toward some deadly spot, but he did not want to show his own hand too early.

Then, suddenly, there was a soft pop behind him, and he felt an instant searing pain on his arm. He went down hard, cursing himself for trusting Simpson to fight fairly. The man had someone in among the trees with a silenced gun, and now the Frenchman was as good as dead.

"All right," Simpson called to the gunman, "I'll finish him off."

The near-darkness was his only ally. They could not see how badly wounded he was, whether he was alive or dead. He saw Simpson walking slowly forward, holding something in his hand. Then a match flared, and the Frenchman knew that Simpson planned to finish him off with a glob of *plastique*. He wished now he'd brought the pistol, but it was too late for second thoughts. With the hand beneath his body, he managed to work his own weapon of *plastique* free from his belt.

Simpson was still thirty feet away when the Frenchman twisted suddenly and touched off the small skyrocket he'd been concealing. It took off almost faster than the eye could follow, and his aim was true. Simpson's arm was just coming back to hurl his own bomb when the skyrocket hit him full in the chest and exploded. It was not a big charge—only large enough to kill a man.

The Frenchman left the body and ran toward the trees, searching for the gunman, but the man was already fleeing, crashing through the underbrush and out onto the street at the edge of the park. The fight was over for him.

In the distance the sound of a siren began to grow in volume. The Frenchman headed for the street himself, walking fast and not looking back.

"Mr. O'Bern is pleased," Joyce told him. "But how did you do it?"

He stared at the floor for a moment before answering. "I bought a small skyrocket—like they use in the Guy Fawkes Day celebra-

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tions—and loaded the tip with a small quantity of *plastique*. My aim was good. I was lucky."

"Was it easy to kill him?"

"I was afraid I wouldn't be able to do it, until he had someone shoot at me from behind a tree. After that it was easy."

"Will Mr. Charles' friends be after you now?"

"It's hard to say. I'm leaving London, anyway."

"O'Bern will have the money for you."

"Tell him to keep it. I couldn't take it for killing Simpson." He reached into his jacket pocket. "And here's something you might want to see. Your friend Gastor had a contract with Charles. He was going over to the other side. Charles would have had no motive for killing him, but O'Bern certainly would."

She went all white, staring at the document with the signatures on it. "Is this true?" she asked.

"Charles would have had no reason to lie."

She was silent for a long time. Finally she asked, "What will you do now—go back to Paris?"

He shook his head. "Not Paris. I will fly to New York in the morning. My skill with plastic might prove useful there."

She looked again at the contract. "Would you leave me your pistol when you go? I might need it."

"Don't do anything foolish. It isn't worth it."

Nevertheless, when he left for Heathrow in the morning, it was without O'Bern's money or the pistol. He thought it would save him having to slip it past the metal detectors again, and he foresaw no use for it before he reached New York.

Thus, he was unarmed when two of O'Bern's men found him on the main concourse at the terminal, waiting for his fog-bound plane. "O'Bern's dead," one of the men said simply. "Joyce killed him, and you put her up to it."

"Not really," he started to explain, but there was no time for explanations. No time, no pistol, no skyrocket, no *plastique*.

He turned to run, trying to put the other travelers between himself and O'Bern's men. Then he heard the screams and the shots, and felt the bullets' impact, and knew that after all he'd been through it was a poor way to die.

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It has been noted that delay is ever fatal to those who are prepared.

Delayed Sailing

The marine superintendent looked up sharply from his desk as a man's raised voice mingled with the voice of the superintendent's secretary in the outer office. His door was suddenly thrust open by a blond man in his late twenties, Miss Barth behind him, protesting, "Captain Fraim, I told him you wouldn't see him without an appointment—"

The man turned and shut the door in her face. Captain Fraim rose in anger, but froze as the stranger drew a small revolver from a pocket of his checkered sport jacket and snapped, "Sit down."

Captain Fraim hesitated, then slowly eased himself back into the swivel chair and sat with a tight grip on the arms, as if he might spring up again. He was a square-faced, heavy man with stubble-

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like gray hair, wearing horn-rimmed reading glasses at the moment. In his many years at sea and the five he had spent ashore as marine superintendent of the Stellar Line, this was his first experience of being intimidated with a gun.

"I'm afraid you're mistaken. There's nothing of great value in here."

"This isn't a stickup. I've got something else in mind." The stranger glanced at his flashy gold-banded wristwatch, just as three long blasts sounded on the steam whistle of a vessel at an adjacent pier. "That must be the 'All visitors ashore' call from the *Starlite*. She's due to sail on time at two o'clock—another fifteen minutes. Telephone her captain to delay sailing."

Captain Fraim was outraged by the demand: "And if I refuse?"

"I'll kill you, and shoot my way out of here if I have to."

Fraim stared incredulously at the stranger. His knowledge of gunmen had been gained mostly from movies and television, and this man didn't seem to conform. His light-blond hair was shaped in mod style, the darker sideburns deep and bushy; wearing a broad, red-spotted tie and yellow shirt under his sport jacket, he was much like some of the young men around the steamship offices. He showed no telltale signs of drugs, but there was an angry light in his eyes that turned Captain Fraim cautious.

As if fearing that his threat wasn't succeeding, the stranger's tone became persuasive. "For the little I'm after, it wouldn't be worthwhile to risk your life and the lives of others to hold out against me. The ship may not be delayed more than half an hour at the most. That won't mean much to the Stellar Line."

"It must mean a great deal to you to risk bringing it about at gun point."

"Enough to make me want to kill if I don't get it. But we're wasting precious time. Pick up that phone and tell the captain of the *Starlite* that when all visitors are ashore, he's to hold off sailing and get the purser to tell passengers that FBI men are coming aboard to search baggage known to contain stolen documents."

Captain Fraim released his grip on the chair arms and reached for the telephone. The stranger's

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threat to kill if balked might be bluff, but there didn't seem enough at stake so far to risk calling it.

"No hints that things here aren't according to Hoyle," warned the stranger. "Same applies if your secretary or anyone else comes in. Get rid of 'em fast." The stranger returned the gun to his pocket, but kept his hand on it.

Captain Fraim dialed for the office switchboard operator and asked for the line to the *Starlite.* He heard the bell ring several times on the shipboard portable before someone responded with, *"Starlite."*

"Who is this?" asked Captain Fraim, knowing that the telephone was answered by anyone who happened to be in the vicinity.

"Quartermaster on gangway watch. Who do you want?"

"This is the marine superintendent. I want to speak to Captain Brontson."

"Yes, sir. Right away, sir."

Captain Fraim was puzzled. The usual reason for delaying a ship's sailing was late-arriving cargo or passengers. The order for the purser implied something else. It was obviously phony, for if FBI agents were on the way to search the ship, he'd have heard from the special agent in charge by now.

The stranger had seated himself on the other side of the desk, first having moved the chair to avoid sitting with his back to the door. His eyes were fastened on the marine superintendent's face, as if he hoped to read his thoughts, but his gaze once strayed momentarily to pictures on the wall, one a painting of the Stellar Line modest-size type of passenger and cargo vessel, the other a framed map of the West Indies and Central America, marked with the line's main routes. It was plain to Captain Fraim that the stranger had some knowledge of ships, at least enough to know that a captain was subject to orders from the marine superintendent, that information for passengers would be passed through the purser.

The voice of the *Starlite's* captain came over the wire. "What's on your mind, Harry?" he inquired, with the familiarity of old shipmates.

"Al, as soon as all your visitors are ashore, delay sailing until you hear further from me and—"

"What's this?" interrupted the captain facetiously. "A bomb scare?"

"Nothing like that. Tell the purser to inform passengers that FBI agents are coming aboard to search baggage known to contain

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some kind of stolen documents."

"Are they crazy? That'll be tipping their hand and giving time to hide the stuff around the ship."

That, mused Captain Fraim, was another of his reasons for thinking the order phony. "Those are my instructions," he said, with a hard glance at the stranger.

"Well, I suppose the FBI knows its business."

Captain Fraim laid the telephone back in the cradle. "What now?"

"If anyone phones you, tell 'em to call back later. I want your line kept open."

The captain picked up a pen. "I'll go on with my work, if you don't mind," he said, coldly sarcastic.

The stranger merely shrugged. On the desk were several letters awaiting Captain Fraim's signature. He glanced over each one and signed it, aware that the stranger was watching him intently. When he had finished, he shuffled the letters neatly together.

"My secretary's waiting for them," he said.

He half-expected that the other would demand to see the letters, but the stranger shrugged indifferently again, as if confident that the captain had written nothing but his signature. Captain Fraim pressed a button. He wondered whether Miss Barth, in view of the stranger's forcing his way in, had eavesdropped on the telephone; but then, even if she had, she couldn't know that his order to delay the ship had been given under duress.

Miss Barth appeared immediately. The stranger's eyes roved over her in obvious appreciation. She was a tall, attractive brunette with a facts-of-life air that suggested fending off the wolves in cocktail lounges rather than in art galleries. Captain Fraim disapproved of her stylish yellow pants suit for office wear, but she wasn't his choice, having been assigned temporarily by Personnel from the freight department a month ago, when his regular secretary tripped on the stairs to the street and broke a leg.

"All signed and ready for mailing, Miss Barth."

Miss Barth gave the stranger a cold stare and stepped up to the desk for the letters. Captain Fraim detected nothing in her glance to him that might have shown she suspected something. She turned her back to the stranger as she withdrew and closed the door.

"Nice but snooty," remarked the stranger, amusedly.

Captain Fraim took up his next work, which was to read over fuel-oil consumption reports, but

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he found it difficult to concentrate in his present state of mind. The stranger kept glancing at his watch, obviously with mounting anxiety. It was almost a quarter of an hour past the *Starlite's* scheduled sailing time. The office was silent except for the clacking of the typewriter in the outer office and the occasional hoot of a towboat sounding through the closed window overlooking the river.

Presently, the telephone rang. The stranger stiffened expectantly. It was Miss Barth. "Someone wants to speak to the man who's with you."

"All right." Captain Fraim held out the handset to the stranger. "For you."

The stranger grabbed for it. "What's the action, Art?" As the stranger listened, something like consternation shot into his face. "Make for the heap. I'm coming right away."

The stranger thrust the handset back at Captain Fraim. "Call your secretary in. Tell her to go out with me to my car for a letter I'll give her to bring back to you. If you want to see that dish alive again, just don't do anything funny before she gets back."

Captain Fraim pushed the button. As Miss Barth opened the door, he said, "Miss Barth, would you mind going out with this man to his car and bring back a letter he'll give you."

Miss Barth opened the door wider and followed the stranger through the outer office into the corridor. Captain Fraim allowed them time to go down the stairway to street level, then he dashed out to the corridor and into the big freight-department office and up to a window overlooking the street, ignoring the curious stares of freight clerks.

He saw Miss Barth and the stranger emerge from the building entrance below him and walk out to the parking spaces. Another man was hurrying toward them from the direction of the pier gates; he hopped into a blue sports car just as Miss Barth and the stranger reached it. Apparently without a parting word to Miss Barth, the stranger snatched open the door on the driver's side, squeezed in behind the wheel, and started the car moving toward the street. Captain Fraim watched for it to turn into the street, but a taxi moved in behind it and blocked his view of the rear license plate.

He hastened back to his office and dialed for the line to the ship again. The third mate answered and said he would get Captain Brontson at once.

During the interval, Miss Barth

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looked in. "He didn't give me any letter," she said wrathfully. "Just got into a sports car with another man in it and drove off, leaving me standing there."

"Did you happen to see the license number?"

"I didn't bother to look. Was there some reason to?"

"I was curious, that's all." Evidently Miss Barth's suspicions hadn't been aroused. He didn't want to upset her just now with word that she had been used as a hostage. "I'll explain later."

"I won't forget that creep's face in a hurry," she vowed ominously.

As the secretary withdrew, Captain Brontson came on the line.

"Al, what's been happening on board?" inquired Captain Fraim.

"Nothing, simply nothing. No FBI showed up yet. The passengers are all agog waiting for them."

"This is in strict confidence for the time being. I was ordered at gun point in my office to delay your sailing and say that FBI agents were coming aboard to search baggage. The man with the gun got a call over my phone and then went out to a car, with Miss Barth as a hostage. The man who had phoned him came from the direction of the pier, and they drove off together. Something apparently went wrong. If it hadn't been for the gun and the way they fled, I'd have thought it some kind of hoax."

"Harry, in this nutty age ashore, it could be anything crazy or outlandish."

"I may know what it's all about by the time you get back. Haul in your gangway and sail."

"One passenger's still ashore—went for a newspaper with the latest stock quotations. The purser warned him the search might be called off and we'd sail at short notice. I'll give him another five minutes."

Captain Fraim, deciding that his next step should be to notify the police, dialed the local precinct station house. The weary voice of the desk sergeant answered.

"This is Captain Fraim, over at the Stellar Line pier. A man forced his way into my office a little while ago and ordered me at gun point to delay the sailing of the *Starlite*. Afterward, he used my secretary as a hostage to get back to a car parked outside the office. He drove off with another man in the car."

"Anyone get the license number?"

"No. I tried to from a window, but a taxi blocked my view. It was a blue sports car."

"Why did he want the sailing

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delayed?" the sergeant asked.

Captain Fraim gave a brief account of all that took place and what was said.

"Cap'n," sighed the sergeant, "we'll send a man over, but it won't be right away. We've just had another stab-mugging and a liquor store holdup, and the rest of the boys are out on other cases, besides which, we're shorthanded."

Hanging up, Captain Fraim mused that his case wasn't urgent enough to take priority over a mugging and a holdup. It would have to be a do-it-yourself job for the time being. Well, he'd had to undertake similar jobs at sea more than once. The place to start would be the pier from which the man who had joined the stranger in the sports car had apparently come. Was it Art of the phone call? Another thought set the captain speculating: that man may have been the passenger who had gone ashore for a late newspaper. One way of making sure would be to inquire whether he had returned aboard.

Even as the thought crossed Captain Fraim's mind, a long, continuous blast came from the *Starlite's* steam whistle, warning craft in the river that she was backing out into the stream. Too late to telephone her. Captain Fraim dialed the pier baggage-room number.

"Was any baggage put ashore from the *Starlite*?" he inquired.

The baggage master himself answered. "Yes, Cap'n. Belonging to a passenger named Martin Crandell. I understand he came ashore for a newspaper and didn't go back."

"Don't release his baggage to him or anyone else. Call me first."

Captain Fraim was cautiously elated. If Crandell were the man who had driven off with the stranger, he could be traced through his ticket records in the passenger department files. Captain Fraim got out his copy of the *Starlite's* passenger list. Martin Crandell had booked to debark at the second port of call, Cristobal, C.Z.—but he might not be the man who had fled in the sports car.

Captain Fraim pictured the pier around that time: visitors gathered alongside the ship, waiting to wave good-bye to friends and relatives; the pier silent and empty of trucks, cargo loading having finished before noon, longshoremen gone home; a man hurrying out through the gates to the parking spaces; perhaps a second man leaving less hurriedly.

Captain Fraim dialed the watchman's telephone at the pier

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gates. "John, during the time the *Starlite's* sailing was delayed, did you notice a man leaving the pier in a hurry?"

"Sure, Cap'n. He came out of a telephone booth and beat it out to the parked cars."

"Did another man leave about the same time?"

"Lemme think." There was a pause. "No, Cap'n, but a guy was coming up the pier just before that. The customs guard stopped him, though, and took him into the customs office. He ain't come out yet."

"Thanks, John."

The second man must be either Crandell or a visitor suspected of smuggling something ashore. Captain Fraim next called the pier customs office and asked to speak to the inspector in charge.

"Jackson, this is Fraim. A passenger named Crandell missed the *Starlite.* Is he in your office?"

"There's a man by that name here. He won't say if he was a passenger or a visitor. He's being held for the FBI."

"FBI!" Captain Fraim exclaimed.

"He was trying to slip ashore with a batch of negotiable securities wrapped round his waist. About half a million dollars' worth by the looks of them. I phoned the Custom House in case they were stolen. FBI agents are now on the way here."

"Did someone tip you off?"

"Hell, no. When a customs guard sees a skinny guy coming up the pier bulging round the middle as though he's six months gone, well—" The customs inspector chuckled. "Women's Lib to my knowledge hasn't got that far—yet."

Captain Fraim put down the telephone in bewilderment. The FBI and stolen documents were somehow involved, after all; and there surely must be some connection between Crandell and the stranger and his companion, Art. The FBI would be interested in knowing of that likelihood.

Captain Fraim called the local FBI office and asked for the special agent in charge, with whom he had become acquainted during a recent investigation into a murder at sea aboard a Stellar Line vessel. The agent came on almost at once and greeted him.

"Good afternoon, Captain Fraim. Nice to hear from you."

The marine superintendent recounted briefly the events leading up to and following the departure of the *Starlite,* concluding with, "Crandell's mixed up in it, it seems to me."

"He wasn't very cooperative at the pier—clammed up, in fact, as

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my agents reported it to me. He'll be interrogated further when he's brought here. Your information may be of great help in inducing him to talk, and I deeply appreciate your passing it along."

"Another fact you might find it useful to know is that the blond gunman has a knowledge of ships, or at least of the ropes concerning them."

The agent called back around four-thirty, interrupting Captain Fraim's speculating whether a detective from the precinct station house was going to show up that afternoon. "I'm going to issue a statement for the press," the agent said, "but I'll clue you in on it first. We've got the full story on the *Starlite* delay. When Crandell was confronted with your account of it, he fumed, 'So they fouled me up! Okay! Those two young punks are gonna take the rap too.'"

"Then I was right," Captain Fraim remarked with satisfaction.

"Crandell is a confidence man with an arrest for possession of stolen stock certificates on his record. His two young punks are a pair of high-flying swinger brothers named Seifert. They were taken into custody at their apartment and brought here a short while ago. Both of them work in the same Wall Street brokerage house. One of them, Whitey—"

"That sounds like the blond gunman," Captain Fraim interrupted.

"Exactly. That's what the other two call him. Whitey has access to the securities vault. Crandell met him and his girlfriend at a discotheque that Crandell uses for a hangout. He conned Whitey into stealing half a million in negotiable bonds, saying he had contacts with organized crime and could dicker for the best price. He made a secret deal with a European buyer in Puerto Rico who would buy the bonds aboard ship in San Juan and could get them ashore without exciting the suspicions of the customs. Crandell then booked in the *Starlite*, intending to remain in her to Panama, then take a plane to San Francisco."

"And disappear, no doubt," Captain Fraim said.

"Exactly. While waiting for sailing day, he kept stalling the brothers on the payoff. Yesterday, Whitey phoned him at his midtown hotel room, and was told by the desk clerk that Crandell had just checked out, with steamship tags on his suitcases. With time short, the two brothers had to work fast, and seized on the first feasible plan to come into their heads.

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"Whitey phoned their office that his brother, Art, was sick and he was taking him to a doctor. They rushed to their apartment in the Wall Street district for an unlicensed Saturday-night-special Whitey kept there, got their sports car from the lot and drove to the pier. Their hope was to smoke Crandell back ashore with as many of the high-denomination bonds under his belt as he could manage, the method they themselves had used; they guessed he wouldn't risk exciting suspicion by going ashore with a briefcase. He overdid it, as we know. Art was watching for him to come ashore, intending to telephone his brother at your office, and then follow him out and force him into the car. He got scared when the customs guard took Crandell into the customs office."

"Well, that about wraps it up," Captain Fraim said. "One thing I'm curious about, though, is how the brothers knew Crandell was aboard the *Starlite*."

"I was expecting that," the agent said, sounding as if he might be smiling. "Whitey's knowledge of ships came from his girlfriend. She works in a steamship office. She knew about the bonds and expected to do a lot of swinging on the proceeds. She phoned Whitey yesterday that there was a Martin Crandell on her boss' copy of the *Starlite's* passenger list and he'd better make sure it wasn't their Martin. After phoning the hotel, Whitey, the girlfriend, and Art got together at lunch time and worked out the plan."

"Are you saying the girlfriend is—" Captain Fraim was too incredulous to finish.

"Precisely. She's undoubtedly listening in on this conversation, as with all your telephone conversations this afternoon. I delayed mention of her as an accomplice until now, to keep her in suspense."

Captain Fraim put down the telephone in slow motion, as if in a daze. The outer office had become strangely silent. He rose and opened the door. The corridor door was just closing behind Miss Barth.

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As we are told herein, "There is no such thing as a skeptic who doesn't want to believe."

The invitations to Clementine Beal's dinner party carried an intriguing phrase: *Group Reading by Mr. Willie Bruneau.* As Clementine had never offered anything less conventional than bridge at her dinner parties it caused a ripple of interest among the invited, and when it was learned that Rowena Telford was to be one of the guests the ripple became a tidal wave.

Everyone in town knew Rowena Telford. Widow of the late Chandler Telford (latest, in fact, of three husbands Rowena had survived), she was a local legend. Thirty years earlier, as Ruby Ditzler, she had left town a sprightly young widow and made a name for herself on Broadway. She had returned to town only six months before Clementine's party and taken up residence in the old Ditzler mansion left to her by her first husband. Here she lived in Garboesque seclusion, seldom seen on the streets and only occasionally glimpsed, in dark glasses and concealing hat, at one of the better shops or cinemas. Every hostess in town had tried to lure her into the social arena, but not until now had she been tempted forth. Clementine was ecstatic. Rowena Telford and Willie Bruneau! The event had to be a dazzling success.

Willie Bruneau was a psychic just beginning to attain a degree of celebrity that was as yet pri-

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marily local, although stories of his readings for a certain best-selling novelist and for a familiar TV personality had begun to make his name more widely known. Only recently had he begun accepting invitations for group readings in the homes of the well-to-do, where he did not shrink from accepting monetary tributes to his psychic prowess, tributes that, so far, had been far more modest than Willie himself.

Stories about him became town gossip. Everyone soon heard about the fabulously wealthy old lady in New York who had taken him to Hawaii for six months out of gratitude for his having saved her life: he had "seen" her nephew greasing the stairs of her mansion in hopes of causing a fatal accident. Another relative had tried to poison her with chocolates; Willie had "seen" this, too. With such tales circulating, which some people were churlish enough to suggest had been started by Willie himself, his legend was bound to grow.

Unfortunately, Clementine's evening got off to a bad start. When she announced, over dessert, that Mr. Bruneau would be joining them later, Rowena Telford was the only one around the table who expressed displeasure.

"I'd rather play cards," she said flatly.

After a moment's panic, Clementine smoothed over the awkwardness. "You'll adore Willie, my dear. Everyone does. Later, if you wish, we'll have a rubber of bridge, just to unwind. Seriously, I understand he's very good."

"Psychics—or fortune-tellers, if you want to call a spade a spade—are never *good*," retorted Rowena in her most devastating theatrical manner. "At best they're merely clever."

"Oh, I'm sure you're right about *most* of them, darling."

"I've met the best of them. They're all ninety-nine percent show biz and one percent psychic."

"Ah, but that one percent!"

Nevertheless, Rowena was a good sport about it. When Willie Bruneau made his entrance, she observed with only the most discreet look of satisfaction the universal dismay of her fellow guests. Willie looked one hundred percent show biz. He was short and plumpish, with a rose-petal complexion, gold-rimmed glasses, flirtatious eyes, a sleek black toupee styled in bangs and ringlets; he wore a plum-colored velour pull-

by Donald Olson

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over, black silk slacks, and snakeskin shoes. He was, furthermore, as glibly facetious as the most experienced con artist.

Yet, once the initial shock was over, this all had the curious effect of soothing rather than exciting skepticism. Such hocus-pocus eyes and razzle-dazzle garb would only be flaunted, one felt sure, by someone as sincere as a child; and this is what eventually came through, a childlike lack of guile that soon had everyone hanging upon his words. He had a flair for the telling anecdote and he wasn't the least daunted by the elegance of the group for which he'd been invited to read. Nor was anyone left in doubt that he had actually read for those celebrities, when he could recount such juicily authentic-sounding bits of gossip about them, speaking with wry compassion of the lady columnist's singular obsession with violet candles and revealing, as if it were already public knowledge, details of the lady novelist's drinking problem.

Rowena Telford was not so rude as to refrain from listening, but she listened with the polite, frosty scorn of the nonbeliever. Nor did she refuse to join the group in the serious business following the preliminary chitchat. Willie instructed the hostess in the placing of the chairs and seating of the guests. Only one dim lamp was left burning.

Taking his place at the round table, Willie removed his gold-rimmed glasses and placed upon his nose a pair of Ben Franklin spectacles with smoked transparent lenses.

Besides the medium, Clementine Beal, and Rowena Telford, the party included Dolly and Della Treff, Fred Zinsel, John Carlyle, Paul Campbell, and Steven and Penelope St. James.

Willie kept talking in the same gossipy tone of voice, and then abruptly, in mid-sentence, his head snapped back, one could actually hear a vertebra crack, and his voice became more highly pitched.

No one could say he was not good—or at least very clever. Instead of the generalities of the ordinary parlor psychic, Willie spoke with a specificity and candor that enthralled his audience.

"Someone at this table is negotiating a divorce. Don't go through with it, dear. That man is dying. There's a lot of phlegm, isn't there? You might even say he's already dead. You know what I mean, dear. Don't blame me! It's not my fault. I only tell what I see. The raft is drifting away from shore. Death, my dear, al-

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ways death. Now, I don't want you to think I'm mercenary, but you'd be far better off sticking with him till the end. There's a lot of property involved. Besides, you're going to be a great comfort to him in the last six weeks. He's insanely jealous and he knows about P. But you're in no real danger from him, darling. Now, someone at this table is very fond of horses. But whatever you do, don't go riding with a man named Gene . . ."

He didn't pause once, never stumbled, never gave the impression he was repeating something he'd rehearsed. It was all urbane, fluent, chattily confidential, and thus the effect all the more harrowing. When the lights were turned up, no one cared in the first few moments to look directly into his neighbor's eyes.

It was Rowena Telford who broke the spell: "*Now* can we play cards?"

Clementine gave a sigh. "Splendid idea, dear. Willie, I can't thank you enough. You were marvelous. But then, why should I *thank* you? I'm sure some of your remarks were aimed at me . . . No, don't tell me! Now, I know you don't charge a fee for demonstrating your gift, but you can't possibly object if we express our delight by—"

She was cut off by a shriek from Rowena: "My brooch! It's gone!"

Dead silence reigned. Everyone stared at her. Her hands were skimming over her clothes. They had all noticed the brooch, of course; several had admired it: a wreath of diamonds around a huge star ruby. A search was undertaken.

"When did you last notice it?" Clementine asked her.

"I don't know. It was simply there. I never thought about it."

Della Treff said, "I'm quite positive you had it when we came in from the dining room."

"Then it must be in your clothes, or around your chair." Clementine's voice had a mousy note of alarm.

The search was concentrated in that area, and again Rowena felt about her person. No sign of the brooch.

By now the company was visibly uneasy, especially the two men who had flanked Rowena at the table during the reading.

When no trace could be found of the missing brooch, Rowena became indifferent. "Don't worry, it'll show up. It has to be here."

Clementine was in the worst position possible for a hostess: if she dismissed the matter she would be doing her guest of honor

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an injustice, and if she pressed the search to its limits she would insult each of her other guests. The poor woman was distraught.

"It's quite costly," said Rowena, "but not something to ruin your evening over. Please don't fuss." She shot an ambiguous look at her hostess. "It's been fun, darling. But now I must say good night."

Clementine looked helplessly from Rowena to her other guests. Willie Bruneau, looking exhausted from the strain of the reading, had sipped a glass of sherry while the search was going on.

It was the lawyer, Carlyle, who finally said what all of them had known must be said: "Forgive me. We can all see what a spot our hostess is in because of this little mischance. I, for one, insist upon being searched before leaving this house."

Rowena replied coldly. "Don't be absurd. I'm certainly not suggesting anyone stole my brooch. It's here and will be found. Let's just forget it."

Carlyle shook his head. "I'd rather not leave the house under a cloud of guilt. If one of you fellows will step into the next room with me, I insist on being searched."

"And so do I." Willie Bruneau's voice was still languid with fatigue and laced with humor, as if it were all a huge joke. "I'm more or less the only outsider among you."

"Well, I didn't take it," spoke up Dolly Treff, sparkling with her own collection of gems. "I drooled over it, but I'm no thief. I agree with these gentlemen, though. Don't you, Della? The logical thing is to be searched before leaving."

Now all clamored to be searched.

Rowena looked very cross. "I won't permit it. I know none of you are thieves."

Carlyle spoke with deference but determination. "Please, Mrs. Telford. No one objects to being searched. It's the only way to clear the air. Of course, if it's to mean anything, we must *all* submit to being searched. Including you."

Rowena gave him a withering look. "As if I would steal my own brooch!"

"Will you allow yourself to be searched along with the rest of us?"

"No!"

Rowena's anger came suddenly, but fiercely. The others looked at her with growing suspicion.

"But you must see what that implies."

"What it implies, my good man, is that *I* haven't a guilty con-

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science at all," Rowena fumed.

"Quite the opposite, I should say. It's been apparent, Mrs. Telford, that you have no faith in Mr. Bruneau's gift. Well and good. I'm not a believer myself. But I'm willing to keep an open mind. And I don't at all object to being entertained in the process—as I was. But what you're obviously trying to plant in our minds is the belief that Mr. Bruneau is not only a faker but a thief as well—or the accomplice of one. Mr. Bruneau has agreed to be searched. So has everyone else, except you. What other conclusion can we draw but that you've faked a theft in order to impugn this man's character?"

This put Rowena into a stammering fury. "You're talking rubbish and you know it. One of you in this room needs a scapegoat. You should appreciate my volunteering for the role. Surely you must see that if we're all searched and none of us has the brooch, it would prove only that someone is a most clever thief. Don't you suppose that whoever stole it would expect to be searched? I'm letting you all off the hook. No applause?" She turned to Clementine, who looked ready to bawl in the shambles of her evening. "I'm so sorry, my dear. I should never have worn the silly brooch. Good night." Rowena stalked out.

Universal relief greeted her departure.

"What a shabby stunt!" cried Della Treff. "Just because she didn't believe in Mr. Bruneau she didn't have to make him out to be a thief."

This was the substance of most of the remarks, but of course Rowena Telford was a legend of eccentricity. What else could one expect from her?

"She was in the theater for years," said Dolly. "I suppose she hates being upstaged even now."

From the sofa where he reclined, sipping another glass of sherry, Willie Bruneau intervened. "You're all being more than kind to me and less than kind to that poor lady."

They all looked at him.

"If I were in your shoes," said Carlyle, "I don't think I should be quite so charitable."

"Her motives were entirely pure. You've misjudged her."

Clementine looked puzzled. "Are you saying she *didn't* steal the brooch herself?"

"Precisely."

Now there was general consternation. "Then you mean to say one of us *did* swipe it?"

"Not at all. It's here in this room."

"Impossible. It's been searched."

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"Not that thoroughly, Mr. Carlyle. Please be kind enough to remove those flowers from that bowl. I think you'll find the brooch at the bottom of it. It's deep. Better roll up your sleeve."

Carlyle did as he was asked, reached down into the bowl and fished out the brooch. The discovery was greeted with an outburst of wonder.

"But how on earth did you *know*?" cried Dolly.

"Because I saw him remove the brooch from her dress and hide it there."

Again, tension. "Saw who?"

"Her second husband." Bruneau smiled. "The spirit of her second husband, you understand. He always hated that brooch because Ditzler, her first husband, had given it to her. She was very fond of it and insisted on wearing it. He would always remove it and hide it from her. I feel sure she knew what had happened to it here tonight, though she would never have said so. She's profoundly psychic herself, even if she won't admit it. It frightens her. She can't cope with anything—unworldly."

Clementine was stricken. "Poor Rowena. She thinks we all believe she did it deliberately, to discredit you. Would you all mind if I left at once and took it to her, with sincere apologies from all of us?"

"Please let me," Willie said. "I may be able to help her. *This* may show her the way."

Thus did Willie Bruneau and Rowena Telford become the hero and heroine of the evening. They would have drunk to their success had Rowena had anything suitable in the house to offer the medium, who found her sitting in what had been the maid's tiny room on the third floor of the mansion, sipping a soft drink and munching a cheese sandwich.

"So how much did they cough up, Willie, dear?"

"Eighty-five bucks."

She held out her hand and he counted out her share.

"There'll be more next time," she promised him. "I may be broke, honey, but I've got the two things you need most right now: contacts and charisma. And as long as nobody knows I'm broke, we can both cash in on them."

He smiled modestly. "You won't be broke for long."

His self-assurance, that air of mystic tranquillity, soothed whatever doubts she still might have had that their association would be mutually beneficial. She had noticed that air about him the first time they met, quite by accident, in the air terminal lounge in Newark.

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He drew the brooch from his pocket. "I can't tell them apart."

"I can." She took the real brooch out of her purse. "A hunk of jewelry and an old house. Three marriages, and they're all I've got to show for them. Where did you hide it?"

"In the flowerpot."

"First time in my life I really enjoyed acting. And I intend to keep hustling, sweetie. I'm sick of living in this dinky room and eating sandwiches. It's not my style." She looked shrewdly reflective. "That Carlyle's a smart cookie, you know that? Ugly, but loaded. Willie, before you go—"

"No."

"Please."

"Absolutely not."

She sighed. "Did they really swallow the business about my second husband's spirit hiding the brooch?"

"If they didn't, they were too well-bred to laugh." He looked at her as if, for all her sophistication, she were still a child. "It doesn't matter, actually, if they believe or don't believe. To a psychic, my dear, all that counts is one small but very essential fact of human nature."

"And what's that?"

"There is no such thing as a skeptic who doesn't *want* to believe."

Rowena wasn't sure if Willie was ninety percent show biz and ten percent psychic, or the other way around. Maybe he himself didn't know to what degree his prophetic capacity was genuine.

He got up to go. She put her hand on his arm. "Please. You promised."

"Darling, not now. I'm exhausted. You've no idea how much it takes out of me."

"But I've got to know, Willie. I won't sleep a wink tonight."

Grudgingly, he sank back into the chair. "Oh, very well, Rowena, if you're going to nag. But I don't promise anything. When I'm tired, nothing's likely to come through. So don't blame me."

She clapped her hands together like a little girl who had been promised a glimpse of Santa Claus. "I want to know if I'll see him again. If we're going to become *very* good friends. Mr. John Carlyle and I."

Willie tried to relax, threw back his head until he heard the little snap in his neck. His tone changed. He began to speak.

Rowena listened.

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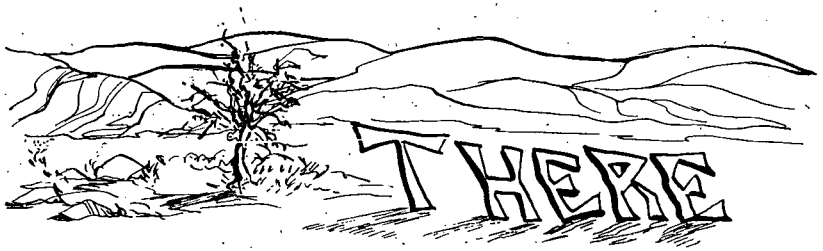
Aeronautics should, perhaps, include some study of herpetology—and of herpetologists.



Dr. Leroy Webb sidled out the rear door of Life Science Hall, New Mexico State College, and paused on the brink of the faculty parking lot. After another evening in the smelly lab, he always paused here to taste the cool fresh air of night. Tonight Webb, a small, shy, gray, stooped man with puckered face turned moonward like a wistful ferret's, paused longer than usual.

The lights of Albuquerque glittered in the lower valley like misty reflections of the stars. Wind out of the Manzano Mountains whispered across the darkened and deserted campus where Webb had marked time as a professor of herpetology for 27 years. *A long time,* he thought with resigned bitterness. *A real long time.*

He thought of Wilma, always asleep when he got home, always stoned by another nightly overdose of TV and double martinis. He hunched one shoulder like a defensive sparrow and walked to his battered station wagon parked in its designated niche under the third tree on the right. Another of his insular days seemed to be phasing out as obsequiously as all of his others. Then a sudden, alien crunch of gravel hooked at his heart, and a part of the tree's shadow moved, leaped, sprang out to form a tall, top-heavy wedge of elemental threat between Webb and his car.

Charged with cold fear, Webb turned to run. It was an automatic response acquired in childhood and never forgotten, like riding a

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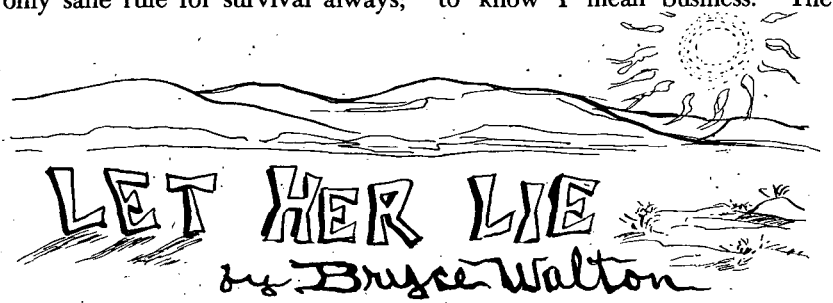
bicycle. For a sickly, undersized patsy bandied from school to school, a victim outsider destined for badgering and battering in ritual glee by every indigenous bully, flight, not fight, was the only sane rule for survival always;

cessity, be part of an old ridiculous dream . . .

Yet aching head, threats of nausea . . . they seemed real—and what was he doing lying here?

"Sorry, Webb, but you just have to know I mean business." The



but now his intended flight was interrupted by a gloved fist that whacked the left side of his face.

He tumbled earthward in stunned slow-motion. Gravel ground into his back. He blinked up dazedly at the moon and stars. They were throbbing and pulsing in eerie unreality. He decided vaguely that it was unreal, definitely unreal; a bad dream, for he had escaped the nihilistic terror of kiddieland fifty years ago. He had gone into hiding, into the protective personality armor of the quiet, timid little man, the polite, self-effacing, unassuming little man—a personality carefully self-created and maintained to avoid violence, or even the possibility of violence in any form. So this senseless assault must then, of ne-

voice was low, flat, close, and terribly earnest. "Don't raise a ruckus. Just cooperate. You won't get another hurt laid on you. Okay?"

The ache stabbed as Webb rolled his eyes. The tall man squatted on his haunches, forearms across knees. Enough moonlight filtered through to reveal faded, dusty denim jacket and jeans, a shapeless hat tilted back. The shadowed face was startlingly white and featureless, like a partly finished sketch on white paper.

The icy glitter of a knife blade flicked up and out like a fang. The point touched Webb's throat. He felt sweat on his forehead and a choking at the back of his mouth.

"All I want out of you is your

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help, Webb. Your know-how with snakes. Rattlesnakes. I need help right now, and I swear if I don't get it, I'll waste you. I don't want to, but I will. And in that case, your wife's already as good as dead and buried."

"Wilma," Webb choked incredulously. "*Wilma—*"

"I just came from your digs. Paid your wife a call. She told me where you'd be—here, feeding and doctoring your crawly pets. She told me what wheels you drive, where to wait, how to get in here."

"But what—?" Webb mumbled in confused terror. "I don't understand."

"You could trick me on this job, Webb. Double-cross me. Maybe get me killed. So I set your Wilma aside as my ace in the hole, a sort of hostage."

"Hostage?"

"Hauled her off for about a twenty-minute ride into that canyonland desert back of your house, into those burnt cliffs and hoodoo rocks. Tied her up. Laid her out in a sandstone crevice just so wide. Put rocks and sagebrush over the top. Now, do I have to tell you the odds against anybody finding her without knowing where to sniff? Do I, Webb?"

Webb waggled his head in numbed shock. His eyes burned. He tried to see Wilma out there, buried alive under black rocks. Their house was south of the college, in the Manzano Hills, part of the old Sunrise Mesa Ranch Homes development. Stretching on south of it was a kind of desert-badlands wilderness of eroded gorges, canyons, fissures, ravines, sand dunes, isolated piñons and solitary junipers fading into burning lava rock beds. *If poor Wilma were really in that maze, in a crack ceilinged over with rock and sage, then weeks of search might never find her. Might never be found except by buzzards or ravens or stray coyotes of the night.*

Webb closed his eyes. *She couldn't be there. Nothing worse could happen to her. She was afraid of night, afraid of loneliness, she hated the desert, hated the sun, hated roughing it. She'd gotten fat and her white skin blistered at the first touch of sun. She was terrified of getting crow's-feet.* Wilma subjected to such alien, helpless brutal terror—it shook Webb up. It shook him up worse than his own helpless terrors, even this one. For a fleeting microsecond he even felt a stab of rage and he wanted to cry out and hit—hit—hit—

"You don't believe it?" The knife withdrew. One gloved hand

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opened near Webb's face. The other hand flicked on a small flashlight. The beam shone clearly on Wilma's jeweled wristwatch, the outsized Mexican jade and silver rings. "You'd better believe it, Webb, or you're both wasted. She's good for the night and part of the morning, but when that noon desert sun starts boiling in, she'll go fast. Now, I'm the only one knows where she's hid. Cooperate, help me, and as soon as we're cleared away, we drive back to your house and I'll show you where she is. But get antsy, you're both goners. And that's the truth."

As the flash swung up and around, Webb saw the finished sketch of the man's face: gaunt, unhealthily gray, etched with too many lines and crags, a scar down the entire left side of face and jaw like a crack in a melon, lips pulled away from long-discolored teeth in a grin that was a frozen snarl; and the eyes—red-rimmed, as flat and mean as a bird's.

"I-I believe you," Webb whispered quickly.

"Okay, brother, let's haul out. We don't have much time." He grabbed Webb's jacket, hoisted him with one hand and propped him against the car. He opened the door and turned Webb around. "Climb in and start her up now. And let's roll her out."

Webb got under the wheel. Numbly he switched on the ignition. The engine started with even more senile reluctance than usual. The man entered through the rear door and crawled through the clutter of burlap bags, cans of gas and water, spare tires, canteens, old clothing, and snake-hunting gear. He crouched low behind the front seat and breathed against Webb's neck.

"Wilma says you keep your snake gear all here in your wagon. That right? It's all in here now?"

"Yes. I make frequent field trips to the desert after rattlers. I keep all my equipment in the car."

"Okay, haul out." The knife point touched his neck, just below the right ear. "No stunts with the guard at the gate or else. Your course is U.S. 44 west toward the Canoncito Indian Reservation. We're going a little past Armijo. How's your tank?"

"There's enough gas."

"Haul out."

The familiar lonely highway through barren hills, shadowy clumps of sand sage and juniper shining under the moon as though coated with frost—all of it drifted past Webb's vision like the continuing landscape of a bad dream.

The man still sat in back, breathing at his neck. "Wilma was

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right about everything but when you'd check out of your lab. I got worried maybe you'd gotten nipped by one of your pets. They give you trouble? That what held you up?"

"No. This was once-a-week feeding time. I had to force-feed some of the big rattlers. Then I had to crate up several for shipment to zoos. Had to prepare others for dissection during tomorrow's classes. And I had to milk a dozen others of their venom."

"Ugh," the man said with genuine disgust. "What do you do with *that*?"

"Sell it to research centers."

"Who needs it?"

Webb rubbed his eyes. "They're studying the potent enzyme contained in toxins. Terminal cancer pain is being eased by snake venom diluted three thousand times. It's used as a blood coagulant and—"

The man interrupted with a dry humorless chuckle. "Selling to zoos and the like—guess you rake off some good Christmas money."

"I need it. A professor's salary here isn't impressive."

The man gave what might have been a sympathetic grunt. Then, just past the flashing neon of *Chico's Taco and Joy-Burgers,* he said to slow down, make the next right at the blacked-out tepee. Webb was to ease around to the left of the tepee, cutting his lights and motor as he coasted in.

"Why, it's Mr. Buck's place," Webb said with a shock of sudden recognition.

"Yeah," the man growled. "A snake pit."

The swerving headlights lit up an old wooden sign hanging between two peeled cottonwood poles above the gravel drive:

UNCLE BILLY BUCK'S
TRADING POST
Liquor—Beer—Burgers—Gas
Injun Curios

A newer and more readable sign with big red phosphorescent letters flared up in front of the dilapidated tepee:

BURGLARS BEWARE!
My Money Is Guarded By
LIVE RATTLESNAKES!
They Bite!

Webb knew all about Mr. Buck's Watchsnakes. He knew more about them than anyone. He had captured them and installed them for Mr. Buck.

Now at least part of the kidnapper's motive seemed clear. The man needed an expert to handle Mr. Buck's Watchsnakes. But why? And what had happened to Mr. Buck?

Mr. Buck had dropped in at the college to see Webb six months before. A red-faced, sixtyish, fat

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and genial old-timer sporting suede boots, fringed leather vest, long yellow-white hair and a straggly goatee, Mr. Buck complained about having been robbed seven times in seven weeks. Nothing big. He was a very poor man, proprietor of the run-down, sagging imitation of an Indian tepee made of adobe, pine poles and discarded beer bottles. A local eccentric content to pump just enough gas, move just enough burgers, beer, and phony "Injun" curios to keep him in beans and whiskey—or so he'd said.

Young punks and road bums needing Saturday night fun money or a quick fix kept cleaning out his meager till. Two-bit punks, said Mr. Buck, afraid of big risks, knocking over the little tills of poor defenseless merchants. He couldn't afford it. He was lucky to clear two hundred dollars a month during the tourist season. He couldn't afford expensive burglar-alarm systems, watchmen, or watchdogs. Cops patrolled more affluent areas. Mr. Buck was no longer an agile quick-draw, but suffered from arthritic handicaps, and he feared getting knifed, shot, or stomped some night, like the gas attendant just down the road a piece.

He'd heard from Texas friends about good results from using diamondback rattlers for crime control. The macabre innovation proved one-hundred percent effective in discouraging thieves. Little or no initial investment required; they were just plain old Oklahoma and Texas prairie rattlesnakes. Hardly any overhead; they ate once a week, mostly pesty mice and rats on the premises.

Many small enterprises were picking up the idea with the same one-hundred percent burglarproof results. Mr. Buck wanted to try it, too. He'd read about Webb's way with rattlers in the Albuquerque Post. He'd be thankful, would pay reasonably well, if Doctor Webb would catch him half a dozen snakes and see that they got installed so they'd be an inconvenience only to burglars at night.

Webb had readily agreed, delighted by the novelty. He'd captured six of the largest diamondbacks he could find, installed them appropriately and given Mr. Buck directions for care and upkeep. Mr. Buck had called later with happy assurances that no burglars had since come within smelling distance of his Trading Post. The Watchsnakes were doing well . . .

Webb switched off the ignition. Why did this vicious character need to deal with Mr. Buck's snakes? He was desperate enough to kidnap two people and

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threaten murder. Would he do that to rob poor old Mr. Buck's till of a few dollars?

"Let's move the gear," the man said with nervous impatience. He crawled out the back. Webb got out and crunched back on gravel to where the man had the tailgate lowered.

Annexed to the back of the tepee structure were two low, flat-topped, connected adobe rooms. The first, opening directly off the tepee, contained Mr. Buck's office, his money, and the snakes. The next room was where Mr. Buck kept house. The whole structure was dark and still; no sound but yellow-dusted wind making its gritty whisper through sage and junipers. Little hog-nosed bats fluttered across the moon. An owl drifted low over Webb's head, as silent as a wisp of smoke.

"Out with the gear," the man said.

"Which gear?" Webb asked. "It's specialized. Depending on what use is intended—"

The man turned with animal fury. "You put those snakes in there, Webb. You get them out. My money's in there. My whole damn future's in there. I want to go in there and get my money and I want you to clear those snakes out." His flat voice rose to a dangerous impatient whine. "Get them the hell out of my way, Webb. And you'd best do it fast."

Webb nervously dragged gear over the tailgate: hobnailed, calf-high boots, oaken bludgeon, forked stick, leather gauntlets, snake-box with wire top, snake-bite kit in a canvas packet, a bamboo pole with screw eyes down its length and nylon cord running through them and ending in a loop which could be slipped over a snake's head and drawn taut. Webb sat on a wooden crate and put on the boots while the man stood staring at the adobe wall and the wooden-planked door behind which the snakes, and his future, waited.

Webb stood up. "Soon as it's clear in there I'll call for you to come in."

"Get them all the hell out!" the man cursed.

"Not necessarily all of them if you want to save a lot of time. No snake, except the python and black racer, is naturally aggressive toward man. The diamondback isn't usually aggressive except in self-defense. That's a small space, that room. Six big snakes in it. Some will feel I'm invading their domain and will attack. Others may not bother. Might as well leave the more genial ones be. It'll save much time—and

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trouble. No sense riling them."

"Just clear me a way, Webb. That's all."

Webb put on the gauntlets, hooked the snake-bite kit and oaken bludgeon to his belt. He gathered up the hafts of a forked stick and two snake-catcher poles in his left hand, leaving his right hand free to use the bludgeon. He stepped toward the shadowed door and hesitated. He thought of Wilma somewhere in the dark terror of a rock coffin, and then he thought of that roomful of waiting snakes. He'd never tackled more than two rattlers at once, and that had been on the open desert with plenty of maneuvering space. Six rattlers in a small closed room was something else. It was more like dropping into a snake pit, and the most skilled snake-catcher would never do that voluntarily.

One other thing made him hesitate. He looked around at the man. "Where's Mr. Buck?"

The man growled with fury and jumped at Webb, his hands out. Webb flinched back, then felt the man's powerful fingers dig into the back of his neck, forcing his face down toward the ground.

"You're worried about Uncle Billy? You can die any minute. Your old lady's screaming to get loose, fighting off scorpions and running out of breath. And you worry about Uncle Billy? Okay, damn you."

The usual desert litter was a shadowy pile between the two junipers where Mr. Buck's hammock swung. The man kicked a fold of greasy canvas tarp aside, pushed Webb's face down.

Dead Mr. Buck sprawled on his back, fat body bulging and glistening white in the moon's glow like a giant grub. Blood had hardened in a brown crust over his pale hair and face and goatee. Flies scattered, buzzing furiously, crawled back over the crust in a swarm. Webb lunged back from under the man's hand and fell back, gagging, against the adobe wall by the door. The man jumped after him, swearing, and gripped his coat with both hands and pressed him against the wall. The man's steel-cable fingers trembled and his voice cracked with fury.

"Damn you. Now you have to know why and how. Okay, I killed the double-crossing toad. Took my sweet time doing it, too, and six months back I'd have sworn I wouldn't hurt the fleas on a dog. But he made me a deal six months back. I'm a crop duster with an old beat-up single-engine Cessna. Deal is, I fly down to Mexico and bring back a load of pot.

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"Uncle Billy's got the contacts, he says. He can buy the weed there for thirty dollars a brick, sell it in Tucson for a hundred and thirty a brick. He explains all about how you almost never get caught. Over ten planes cross the border every night, land unnoticed on sagebrush desert by moonlight—in Arizona, Texas, California, New Mexico. Aerial smuggling's big business. Customs agents almost never tag a flying drug-runner. It's a long border and there's a lot of air space to get lost in up to 18,000 feet. So I buy the deal. I take the seats out of the Cessna and strip her down, making room for hauling back five hundred bricks at once. Fifty thousand dollars for one night's haul!

"We all need Christmas money, Webb. I learned to fly in the Korean war and once you fly you can't do anything else. But I ended up a lousy crop duster, and now the Vietnam eagles flap home to roost and flyers are a dime a dozen. Fifty thou a night! I can't refuse. I make that haul three nights running. A hundred and fifty thou!"

He released Webb, stepped back and kicked Uncle Billy's head. "But I never touched any of my money, Webb. He double-crossed me. Shot me. Crippled me. Burned my plane on the desert. Left me to rot and feed the ravens. But I stayed alive, crawled over the damn sand like a lizard until the sun boiled the marrow out of my bones and scrambled my brains. What kept me going was him. Getting him. Getting my money.

"Basque sheepherders scraped me up and kept me breathing. Took six months to mend enough to get back here. He was still nesting on the loot, about to fly out of the country, but waiting to make a last big haul. Hard stuff this time—heroin, a street-level value of two hundred fifty thou! Tells me that. Tells me just about everything after I've worked on him with the knife and a live scorpion on a string. Tells me where the money is, buried in there, under the floor. Little steel safe in there too. But it's just a dupe to throw dust in your eyes. Keeps a few hundred in the safe and the till, just as a front, see? An excuse to claim small stickups as reason to move in his Watchsnakes, without anybody suspecting what he really wants guarded.

"His Watchsnakes—the one thing he didn't tell me about. Wanted to surprise me. But when I start to open the door I hear them buzzing—like a whole pit full of rattlers. So I don't go in. I

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can't burn them out without burning the money and flagging in the fire trucks and cops. No time to get gas or poison or anything. Already made arrangements to fly out of here tonight to Guerrero. I go through Uncle Billy's wallet, his room back there. I find out about you, the expert in the snake field, his consultant and efficiency expert. I went by your house—"

He began kicking Uncle Billy's head again. He kicked and kicked, then stumbled back breathing heavily, fists clenched and hitting at the air. Finally he looked up. "You ready to go in?" he asked in a flat, tired tone.

"Yes," Webb said. "I've been ready."

"Then you just go on in. Go right on in. The door's unlocked and your pets are getting all worked up to see you."

Webb pushed the door inward, reached in and clicked on a light suspended from the ceiling. Warm musty air fanned out with the familiar smell of rattlesnakes, a smell like fresh crushed cucumbers. Soft hissing broke out, followed by a low, gentle rattling as Webb eased inside. Then the rattles suddenly broke into an excited whirring chorus.

Webb stepped to the left of the door. He surveyed the square, low-raftered room quickly. In the far-right corner stood a four-drawer wooden filing cabinet with peeling varnish, next to a small steel safe squatting on the planked floor. One door, no windows; the grille of an air-conditioner, not operating, protruded from the opposite wall. Next to it was a small mahogany rolltop desk, open, holding a cradled telephone. In front of it stood a straight-backed chair. The floor's center was decorated by a round Navajo rug; nothing else there but the snakes.

He saw only four. One was on the desk top, coiled high as a bushel basket, wedgelike head, that tip of horned, segmented tail peeping out of the coils. Another coiled on top of the safe. The pitted, fluke-shaped head of a third was sliding like a smear of brown oil out of the lower filing cabinet drawer. Evil, slit-eyed head aloft and weaving, shaped like the ace of spades, it slithered at Webb in an eager S-shape, the ten segments of its keratin rattlers vibrating furiously in that warm room at 48 cycles a second. A fourth snake lolled out full length along the baseboard directly across from Webb. He couldn't resist the pleasure of fleeting admiration of the mighty diamondback, *Crotalus atrox*, king of Western snakes; seven feet long, big around as a big man's arm, 25 pounds, the heavi-

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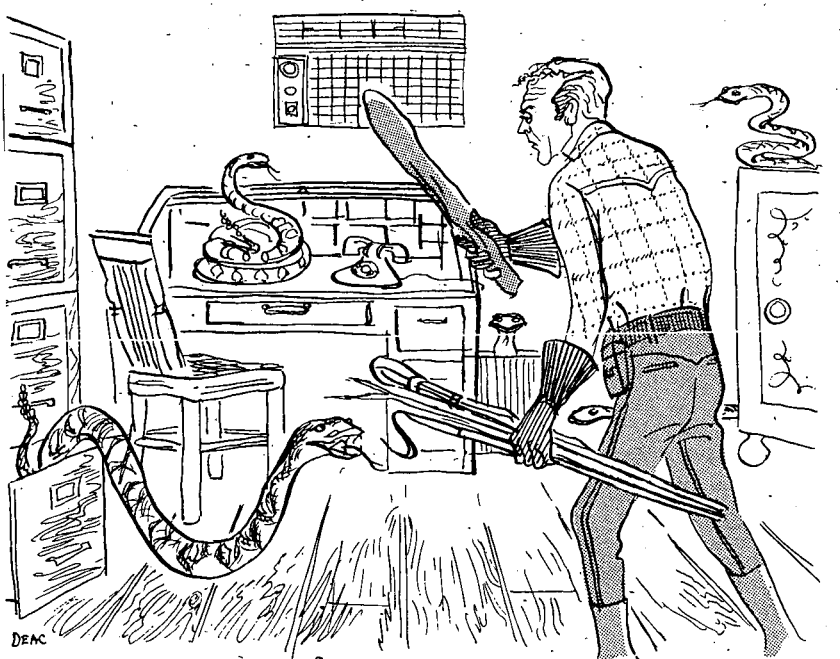

est among venomous reptiles . . .

It buzzed, lifted its head. Eyes brightening, it extended its narrow black tongue to test the air. The blunt head rose higher on the adroit neck. Those glass-shiny eyes watched him, curiously alert and intelligent, expanding, seeming to analyze his presence.

They all watched him, eyes brightening, tongues flicking. Where were the other two? There; a flat venomous head rose from the wastepaper basket near the desk. It slid out rapidly, its dark brown diamond hexagons and orange, pink, red and green scales glinting under the light. It and the one from the opposite wall were slithering toward him sideways, rattles whirring eagerly.

Where was number six?

The two most aggressive ones were advancing. The one from the opposite wall stopped in the middle of the room, on the Navajo rug three feet away. It coiled. The other, four feet from the wicker wastebasket, was eyeing him too. Tongues flicked and rattles vibrated more wildly.

Webb stood still. They had only

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a moderate sense of vision, and for close-up objects only. They had no real sense of hearing, but were extremely alert to vibrations. They were amazingly sensitive to ground tremors, could sense a man's footsteps approaching from considerable distance. They knew, from the slightest movement of his foot, just where to find him.

He reached back with slow care and leaned the snake-catcher poles against the wall behind him by the closed door. He angled the forked stick down at the nearer snake. With a sudden, skilled lunge, he pinned its head against the rug between the forks. Its body slammed, whipped, convulsed around the haft of the stick. Its mouth gaped, jaws unhinged and white venom flew over the Navajo design.

Webb unhooked the bludgeon and smashed the hissing head with four direct blows. Straightening, he went after the one from the wicker basket, pinning its head down on the second try. It flailed like a whip and bit at the boards, staining them with venom. Webb pounded its head until it lay still.

He stepped back, sleeving sweat from his forehead, and saw the one from the filing cabinet slithering at him, tensing to strike. He flipped it off balance. Before it could recover its poise, he pinned its head down and smashed it with repeated blows.

Sweat stung his eyes as he stumbled back. The two on the tops of the desk and safe were still coiled, they hadn't moved. They were the least aggressive, and they might not attack at all. Meanwhile, the sixth snake could be in but one place.

Webb kicked aside the Navajo rug. Kneeling, he opened his pocketknife and with the blade pried out one of three loose pine boards a yard long.

"Whoa there, little brother."

Webb looked back over his shoulder. The man had pushed the door open four inches and his face was there, a twisted mask of fear and warning threat. "Best keep your hands out of there. You got no call in there!"

"Neither have you," Webb said, backing to the door. "Not yet anyway."

"Why the hell not yet?"

"Three snakes are dead. Those on the desk and safe are very sluggish. They don't want any trouble. But the sixth one is there—under the floor."

The man pushed the door wide and edged into the opening. He peered down at where Webb had removed a floorboard. A vicious explosion of rattling came out. "He put one of them devils right

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in there on top of my money!"

Webb nodded and licked sweat from his upper lip. "Stand there and watch those other two. If they start to uncoil and come down toward the floor, yell. I'll take care of this one now, and you'll have your money."

He replaced his forked stick with one of the snake-catcher poles he'd leaned against the wall. With the end he flipped the other two loose boards out of position. The opening in the floor was now a yard long and about two feet wide. "Can get him easier with the loop—as he comes out of there," Webb heard himself saying as he crept forward, as he might have done during a field-trip lecture to observing students.

The rattling increased, joined by a loud, almost joyous hissing as the huge flat head oozed up into the light. "Watch the others," Webb repeated. "Watch the other two . . ."

Those oddly curious and alert eyes stared up at Webb. Fat, tremulous coils flowed up and up and out. Webb slipped the dangling noose unerringly over the head, jerked it taut, swung the loop forward and heaved the pole up, at the same time pulling the noose tighter. He kept pulling until the snake's head was clamped in hard against the end of the pole. The seven-foot body beat the air. Webb angled the pole up, way up. He saw the head up there, hazy against the glare of ceiling light. He could feel the terrible, frenzied power of the body whipping about his arms, almost jerking him off his feet. He pulled the cord tighter, vising the neck in harder against the end of the pole. The jaws gaped wide to capacity, spitting in furious terror.

"Webb!" he heard the man shout.

Then he heard the scream. It filled the room and seemed to drown him, welling up and out, ripping and expanding until it burst in a deathlike kind of liberating cry that echoed and reechoed in his brain like a bursting bell.

Only later did Webb realize that the scream was his, and remember his actions and feeling during those next few moments of his life. He remembered the confusion—was this the ending of the nightmare that began in the parking lot? Or was he only now waking up from a whole lifetime of nightmare he had called living?

He remembered a mad, insensate, electrifying, wild and sadistic glee as he swung around and lunged at the man. He remembered his own voice shouting: "Bite, bite, bite!" And the glee,

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the joyous glee and hatred and revenge and power as he lunged out with the pole, lunged and jabbed the gaping jaws of the snake against the man's chest, through the open front of his shirt and jacket, directly onto the flesh.

The man gave a gasping, choking cry of pain and horror. He stumbled back, trying to get out through the open door, but lurched sideways and backed into the wall.

Webb pushed him harder against the wall and jammed the open cotton-white mouth against the man's chest. He kicked the door shut. He heard himself laughing.

He drew the pole back and jammed it out again, like a monstrous striking fang. The man slid down the wall, then fell forward, twisting and thudding full-length on his back. His hat slid over the floor. His head was hairless, striated with burn scars. His eyes bulged. His mouth was open and he was trying to speak and work his arms and legs, but he couldn't move. His nerves were already paralyzed by at least a full cc., about fifteen lethal doses. They weren't at the extremes of his body either, but on the chest, directly over the heart.

Webb remembered releasing the snake from its noose and watching it slither sideways, retreating slowly away from him until it reached the shelter of the desk, and backing under it.

He remembered sitting on the chair and looking down at the man, whose face was a bluish gray. His chest, in the open V of his shirt, was red-wattled, a mass of bruises, bites and bloat. Yellowish thick poison dripped and flowed from fang punctures like dark honey.

Only later did Webb remember lifting the black leather bag out of the hole in the floor; taking it out to the station wagon, counting out $15,000 of it, putting the rest in a burlap bag and jamming the burlap bag under the front seat; returning the $15,000 to the leather bag, putting it back into the hole in the floor; then calling the police.

Knowing how the poison worked, Webb was sure that when the troopers arrived the man on the floor would be dead.

I had to kill him, Webb thought, *or he would have killed me. I knew that as soon as he told me about himself, even told me where he was going down in Mexico with the loot. Soon as he told me that, I knew he didn't intend for me to stay alive.*

He didn't tell that to the troopers but told them just about ev-

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erything else, almost the way it really was. He didn't tell them what the man had told him about the aerial drug-smuggling business, didn't say anything about the $135,000 under the seat of the station wagon. When they asked, he had no idea how old Uncle Billy Buck had gotten hold of that $15,000 he kept hoarded under the floorboards; but the man lying dead there from a cc. of rattlesnake venom, enough to have killed him fifteen times over, he'd known about the $15,000, and he'd wanted it. Wanted it real bad. No question about that, was there?

He'd been so eager about the money he'd rushed in and fallen down and that snake had got to him before Webb could get to the snake. That was how Webb told it to the troopers while they went around looking, and one of them unholstered his .38 and killed the remaining three snakes with one shot for each, right through the head.

"Understand a rattler strikes at an approaching bullet," drawled the trooper, "and just about always takes it in the head. A tall story, Dr. Webb? Or is it true?"

"I really couldn't say, not now," Webb protested, wringing his hands. "My wife—Wilma! We ought to be searching for her right now! We can't waste any time!"

"I'm going to call about that now," said the other trooper. "We'll have police, the National Guard, the Forest Service, students, Boy Scouts, civilian volunteers, everybody out there combing those rocks, Dr. Webb—"

"But we have to hurry!" Webb interrupted shrilly, still wringing his hands and backing toward the open door. "She can't last long out there. Not after sunup."

"We know that for sure, Dr. Webb. We'll be out there searching inside of an hour."

The taller trooper stood spraddle-legged, filling up the center of the room as he thumbed fresh cartridges into his custom-built sidearm. He was also staring at the air-conditioner.

Cold rose in Webb. His throat constricted and his heart felt too big for his chest. Was the trooper getting ideas about the air-conditioner? If he understood snakes he might guess that Mr. Buck had installed the cooling unit according to Webb's directions. It was there to control the rattlers, so they would be an inconvenience only to burglars and not to Mr. Buck.

Anyone who knew snakes knew they were cold-blooded. Their body temperature was dependent on external conditions, air and

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ground temperature and impinging radiation. A rattler was most active in temperatures of 75°-80° F. It sought refuge when its body temperature fell below 55° or approached 100°. That air-conditioner could bring room temperature to under 40°, rendering Mr. Buck's rattlers too sluggish to move, and it could be controlled from the other side of the wall so that Mr. Buck could turn his Watchsnakes off and on, before entering and after leaving his treasure room.

If the man on the floor had known about the air-conditioner and understood snakes, he wouldn't be dead. He wouldn't have needed Webb's expertise. He would simply have lowered the room temperature, packed up his money, and now be flying south.

If the trooper, still studying that air-conditioner, understood snakes, he might be wondering why Webb had not told the man on the floor about it. He might be thinking that it would have saved so much time and trouble—and perhaps Wilma.

The trooper, however, evidently saw nothing of special significance about the air-conditioner. He turned suddenly to Webb. "When the man was dying there—knew he was dying—didn't he say anything? Give some hint about where your wife might be?"

Webb jerked his head from side to side. "He didn't say anything. Even if he'd wanted to say something, he couldn't. He didn't have time."

Then, with a little squeal of relief that sounded conveniently like pain, he ran out and jumped into the station wagon. "I've got to get out there now. I have to start looking. I'll see you there . . ."

As Webb drove away he thought about the $15,000. He hated leaving it behind, but it had convinced the troopers, and he had the rest of it—and his freedom. His freedom was worth considerably more.

He remembered an obscure bit of verse by John Dryden:

"There lies my wife: there let her lie!
Now she's at rest—and so am I."

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Even the thickest skin has its penetrable point.

Shadows Everywhere

"You want what they all want," Garvy said. "There isn't any need to be shy about asking." He was around forty, a wide man—not fat, but wide—with a sharp-nosed, Roman sort of face and dampness beneath the arms of his pale blue dress shirt despite the frigid air-conditioning in his small office.

The boy, in his early or mid-twenties, squirmed in the chair before Garvy's desk, crossing and uncrossing his ankles. "Nobody recommended you or anything. I saw your classified ad in the paper: *Garvy Detective Agency—Shadows Everywhere.* I don't know much about hiring a private investigator."

It's like any other business arrangement," Garvy said with a reassuring smile, "only what you're paying for here are facts—cold facts. Obtaining those facts is my business. You might say, corny as it sounds, that I'm dedicated to pursuing truth."

The boy, who'd said his name

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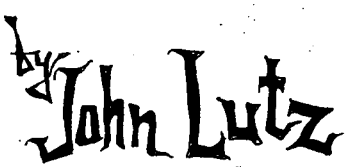
was Dan Windemer, sighed as two vertical frown lines appeared above the crosspiece of his heavy-framed glasses. He was a slight, nerve-ridden youth with pale, quick hands. "I guess we can do business, then, because the truth is what I want to buy."

"Be sure, now," Garvy said, leaning back weightily. "Sometimes my clients get too much for their money."

The pale hands darted together, fingers laced. "I'm sure. I have to know about her."

"Your wife?"

Dan Windemer nodded. "Janet.



I think she's seeing somebody behind my back."

Garvy struck a match to a cigar. "Who?"

"I . . . I'm not sure." Pale hands unlaced, spread, laced. "I just know there's somebody."

"By the way she acts, I suppose," Garvy said thoughtfully. "A man can tell about his wife. You want her followed and reported on?"

"I do," the boy said solemnly, then his wan face twitched out a quick, nervous grin as he realized the customary usage of the words in such solemn tones. "If that's the way you do it."

"That would be the method," Garvy said smoothly. "Thirty dollars a day plus expenses is my usual fee."

"Of course I wouldn't want her followed every day," Windemer said. "Could I let you know when I thought she was . . . going out on me, and you could tail her then?"

Garvy ignored the TV police talk. "If that's what you want. Why don't you tell me something about your wife?"

Windemer nodded, swallowed. "Janet's a secretary at Sanders Electronics. She gets off work at five o'clock, but lately she's been getting home late, sometimes an hour or so after me, and I get off at six. She always has an excuse, car trouble, reports to type, someone she had to drive someplace. Maybe I *am* too jealous like she says, but . . . well, I just have to find out."

"Sure," Garvy said. "Why not put your mind at ease? One way or the other, at least you'll know for sure."

"That's the way I look at it," Windemer said, jerkily tracing the crease in his trousers with his thumb. "Tomorrow night Janet's supposed to be going out to eat,

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then to a show, with another girl who works at Sanders. That's something else she's been doing more and more often lately—saying she's going out with girlfriends."

"And you want me to latch onto her when she comes out of work and give you a report on her activities for that evening."

"Right," Windemer said with a nod.

"I'm free tomorrow night," Garvy said. "I'll be glad to take your case."

Dan Windemer grinned thankfully and took out his checkbook.

While Windemer was writing out a check for a retainer, Garvy said, "Do you have a photograph of your wife?"

Windemer said he did, handed Garvy the check along with a color snapshot of a slim blonde girl. She might have been fourteen instead of in her twenties, long hair combed straight down, and a toothy, wholesome grin.

"She'll be driving a red Volkswagen," Windemer said. "The girl she's supposed to go with is a short brunette and drives a convertible."

"I'll know your wife when I see her," Garvy said, tucking the photo into his shirt pocket. "I can mail you the report later this week."

"No, no, don't do that," Windemer said. "Janet gets the mail sometimes."

Garvy wasn't surprised. "All right, you can drop by the office if you like and pick it up." He stood and held out his hand. Windemer shook the hand and thanked him, moving backward to the door.

At the door the youth stopped and shrugged. "I just have to know for sure, that's all . . ."

"That's all there is to it as far as I'm concerned, too," Garvy said. "I understand perfectly."

Windemer smiled and left, closing the door noiselessly behind him.

Garvy sat for a while, doodling exquisitely graceful curved parallel lines on his scratch-pad. Then he tore off a fresh sheet of paper, jotted down some notes, and placed the paper and Janet Windemer's photograph into a yellow file folder. He made a notation on his desk calendar: Five, Sanders Elec., Janet W.

Sanders Electronics occupied a long, low, absurdly clean-looking building in one of the spanking new business communities that were springing up west of town. As Garvy sat behind the wheel of his gray hardtop across from the building, he listened to the radio

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with half his mind while the other half concentrated on the sun-glazed glass entrance to Sanders Electronics. He was patient, used to his work by now, and he didn't even bother to glance at his watch as the minute hand edged toward five o'clock.

Garvy couldn't count the times he'd sat patiently one place or another in similar situations. There were hundreds of thousands of suspicious husbands or wives in the city, cheating husbands or wives, wondering, never sure. Every weekend in the *Security, Private Investigators* column of the paper's classified section Garvy ran his short, simple ad. Bait cast out into the sea of the city; and invariably some of those countless husbands or wives came to him.

Immediately Garvy's mind tuned out the soft radio music entirely as Janet Windemer walked from the Sanders Electronics building into the hot, late-afternoon sun's harsh, angled glare. She was striding loosely, swinging her long-strapped purse carelessly. There were a few men around her, but none seemed to be paying too much attention to her—only a word exchanged now and then. She was prettier than her photograph suggested, heavier and more shapely, but still extremely young-looking. She appeared to be the type that might giggle a lot.

Garvy watched her walk to her red Volkswagen, roll down the windows, then stand outside the hot car as if waiting for someone.

Within a few minutes a short, dark-haired girl emerged from the building and walked with quick mincing steps toward Janet Windemer. They talked for a while, then Janet rolled the Volkswagen's windows back up and both girls got into a tan convertible with the top down and drove away. Garvy followed.

The first stop was an Italian restaurant where the girls each had pizza and salad, then on to a department store where they spent an hour browsing, making Garvy's feet ache. From the department store they drove to a popular gangster movie, *Marijuana Mama*, that had been showing for three months at a mid-town theater. Garvy rather enjoyed the movie.

After the movie the two girls drove to a nearby lounge and had two whiskey sours each while they talked, interrupting each other with animated gestures. Then Garvy followed them back to Sanders Electronics' dark parking lot where Janet Windemer said good-bye to the brunette and drove off in her Volkswagen. She went straight home, a modern-looking, cheap apartment in the

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north end, and by one a.m. she was, no doubt, in bed beside her husband where she belonged. After the apartment lights had gone out, Garvy fired up a cigar, waited another half hour, then drove away listening to the radio.

It was Thursday, just before Garvy was ready to leave the office, when Dan Windemer came for the report on his wife's activities. He seemed even more nervous than on his first visit as he sat down jerkily in the chair before Garvy's desk and waited.

"No need to act like it's the end of the world," Garvy said with a smile.

No return smile. "Where did she go?"

Garvy rested his elbows on the desk top and looked steadily at Windemer. "To a restaurant, a department store, a movie, a lounge, then to bed."

At the word 'bed' the pale flesh beneath Windemer's eyes ticked, remained drawn.

"You're not the first husband this has happened to," Garvy said.

"Who was the man?" Windemer's voice was high and tight.

Garvy handed him a large brown envelope. "Description's in there."

Windemer leaned forward in his chair, within an inch of tottering. "What did you actually . . . see?"

"I saw them go into a motel room, then come out an hour later," Garvy said calmly. "That's all."

"That's *all*!" Windemer's face was contorted with barely harnessed rage.

"I couldn't very well go up and peek in the window," Garvy said. "And you only hired me to follow your wife and report on her activities. For all I know, nothing went on in the motel room."

"Nothing went on? Are you serious?"

"I suppose not," Garvy said, spreading his hands. "I see your point. It's just that in this business I know you can't assume anything. You have no real proof. Why don't you take the report home and read it, cool off some, then you can decide where you go from here. I'll be glad to help if you feel you have to know more, have definite proof, photographs. But first cool off and think about it."

"What did he look like?" Windemer asked.

"Medium height and build, maybe a little tall, middle-aged, dark sport coat, bit of gray in his hair." *They always worry about the young ones going for the middle-aged men,* Garvy thought as he talked, and his description was vague enough to include most

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middle-aged men; only enough detail to make the man seem real in the client's mind, though there was plenty of meaty, lurid suggestion in the report.

Windemer's jaw muscles worked relentlessly as he nodded his head several times. He clutched the brown envelope tightly and stood. In a choked voice he thanked Garvy.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Windemer," Garvy said. "I tried to warn you that sometimes the truth can be something other than what we want."

"I just had to know," Windemer said as he opened the door. "It was driving me crazy. I don't regret finding it out, for sure." He left quickly, close to tears.

Garvy had a drink from the fifth of Scotch he kept in his bottom desk drawer, then after a few minutes he stood and turned out the office lights. He knew that Windemer would return. They were always driven to find out more, to try to obtain enough evidence for divorce, seek the lurid details. Morbid curiosity usually prevailed in types like Windemer. His wife's unfaithfuless would be like an irritating scab he couldn't leave alone, and at thirty dollars a day it was, for Garvy, a profitable irritation. The Windemer kid would be good for at least another couple hundred dollars before he had to be told it was simply impossible to obtain photographs, that his wife and her lover suspected they were being followed. Suppose Windemer, or any of Garvy's clients, figured out he'd been swindled? (Not that it had happened yet.) What could he do? Make it all public, confess to his wife he'd hired a private detective to watch her? Slim odds on that—and even then it would be the wife's word against Garvy's.

Garvy was humming as he locked the office door behind him and walked jauntily down the hall.

The next morning, as was Garvy's habit, he didn't glance at the paper he'd bought until he'd reached his office and was seated behind his desk with a cup of black coffee. A bomb might have exploded at the unfolding of the paper for the shock it caused Garvy. He sat blanched and stunned, confusedly frightened.

A picture of a smiling Dan Windemer peered out at him from the front page, along with two other photographs and the headline: MAN SHOOTS WIFE, SUITOR, SLAYS SELF. Garvy bent forward, pinning the outspread paper to his desk top as if holding it against a wind as his eyes raced over the print.

Last night at Sanders Electron-

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ics, Windemer had been waiting for his wife on the parking lot. Without a word he'd opened fire on her with a revolver, then walked past her body into the office of the president and shot one Raymond Sanders three times. Windemer then locked himself in a washroom down the hall and, as the police entered the building, he turned the gun on himself. Police said that Windemer had left a note.

Garvy's eyes darted to the two other photographs at the top of the page: Janet Windemer, and a handsome, middle-aged man with a touch of gray in his hair. *One of the perils of making the description so general,* Garvy thought. Only this time it hadn't been general enough.

Sitting back from the paper, Garvy tossed down his steaming coffee in one long gulp. It helped jolt him into a frame of mind where he could think more clearly, try to reason out the mess. The paper had said that Sanders was married and the father of three daughters, the oldest one sixteen. The man was wounded only superficially in the arm and side, and from his hospital bed he was denying everything found in the suicide note of his secretary's husband.

Garvy walked to the electric percolator and slowly poured himself another cup of strong coffee. Would anybody believe Sanders? His wife? Friends? Business acquaintances? Some would, some wouldn't; but enough wouldn't. The main thing was whether the police believed him, and whether they would track down Garvy's connection with the murder-suicide. If that happened, Garvy had to be prepared to testify that he'd observed Sanders and Janet Windemer conduct an illicit affair.

The story made good newspaper copy, and for the next week or so it occupied a position of prominence on the front page as Raymond Sanders' personal life was dragged out and shaken before the eager public. His neighbors said that he'd always seemed a loving husband and father, but on the other hand there'd been a coolness about him, and he was seldom home. At the end of the third week the papers reported that Sanders' wife had left him.

At the beginning of the fourth week a moustached homicide detective named Soreno knocked on Garvy's office door. They had found the report beneath one of the floor mats in Dan Windemer's car.

Somehow the newspapers got hold of snatches of the report, and they appeared in the evening edi-

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tion alongside Garvy's photograph. Garvy stood by his report, signed a statement for the police, and refused adamantly to talk to reporters.

That Friday, as he was eating lunch in a small quasi-western steak house near his office, Garvy was surprised to look up from his sirloin and see that Soreno had taken a seat across the table. The dark, moustached detective was looking at him with professional blankness, but Garvy disliked the faint glitter in his brown eyes.

"Mr. Garvy," Soreno said evenly, "you are one rotten operator."

"I've been told that several times," Garvy said calmly, taking another bite of steak.

Soreno's large eyes were fixed like painted mannequin eyes. "We checked out that report of yours. A girl named Fay Colter says she was with Janet Windemer all that evening. The waitress at Harmon's Restaurant remembers serving them because they forgot to leave a tip. The barmaid at Rico's Lounge remembers serving them whiskey sours. The desk man at the Kingsland Motel doesn't remember either of them at all—*or* Mr. Raymond Sanders."

"The world's a busy place—who pays attention?"

"Mr. Galloway does."

Garvy sipped his iced tea. "So who's Mr. Galloway?"

"The man Raymond Sanders was talking business with most of the evening of your report," Soreno said, a brittle note of hatred edging into his voice.

Slowly Garvy chewed another bite of steak, then just as slowly dabbed at his mouth with his white napkin. "Okay."

"Okay what?"

"I lied. It isn't a crime to lie, only a sin."

Soreno stared at him now with open disgust. "It's a sin and a crime to murder, Mr. Garvy!" he said in a low voice. "Sure as that two-dollar steak is tough, you murdered two people and almost ruined a man's life!"

"Not technically," Garvy said, matching Soreno's rigid stare. "Not legally, either."

"After the publicity you're going to get, you won't be in business in this state tomorrow!" Soreno said viciously. "You won't have an investigator's license or a shred of professional respect! The law can't touch you because you didn't pull the trigger, but you're a murderer all the same!"

"You're getting carried away," Garvy said. "It was Windemer who killed his wife and himself. He was unstable."

Soreno stared at him unbeliev-

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ingly, as if it were Garvy who'd sat down uninvited at *his* table. Then the homicide detective stood abruptly, whirled and walked away.

After watching Soreno angrily push aside the restaurant's thick wooden door and disappear into the street, Garvy started on his dessert. The worst had happened, and he knew he could live through it, could let most of it roll off him. One of the benefits of long years in his business was the formation of a very thick skin. He had endured the worst before.

Soreno was right about the unfavorable publicity. Then came the revocation of Garvy's investigator's license pending further examination. Garvy finally made a formal statement of the truth rather than continue to be hounded by the police and reporters. The truth exonerated Janet Windemer of suspicion of adultery, and in the papers the next morning Garvy read that Raymond Sanders had been reunited with his wife and daughters. A genuine Hollywood ending, Garvy decided, as he cleaned out his desk.

For Garvy, however, it would be the beginning of a new script. There was always some business a clever operator could pursue profitably, maybe even another detective agency in another state. It was a big country, with plenty of fools waiting to be parted from what Garvy wanted. He realized, as he packed his files and office equipment, that the whole mess had taken more of a toll on his nervous system than he'd let himself believe. It would feel good to make a fresh start in some distant, anonymous city.

As Garvy was reaching back into the shadowed depths of his bottom desk drawer to make sure he wasn't forgetting anything, he heard a peculiar sound from the hall on the other side of the door—a sort of hollow, ripping sound. Garvy straightened in his chair, stood, and was about to go investigate when the office door opened.

On the floor behind the man who stood in the doorway, Garvy saw the leather gun case whose zipper he'd heard. The gun itself was a long and expensive, beautifully carved, twelve-gauge double-barreled skeet gun, the kind wealthy sportsmen used to shatter clay pigeons on boring weekends. It was held expertly in the hands of Raymond Sanders, and he didn't look bored.

Keeping the powerful shotgun leveled on Garvy, Sanders closed the door with a backward motion

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of his foot, and took a step closer.

Garvy had only had a gun pointed at him once before, and he was frightened, but he kept his voice steady, tried to throw Sanders off guard. "Have a chair," he said, waving at the cushioned chair by the desk.

Sanders ignored the offer. "You've caused me a lot of grief, Mr. Garvy, more than you'll ever know."

"You'll have even more grief if you pull that trigger," Garvy said, staring at the two gigantic apertures of the shotgun barrels. He knew what a gun like that could do at close range. One twitch of Sanders' finger could shatter Garvy like a flesh-and-bone skeet target.

"I doubt if I have the capacity to experience any more sorrow," Sanders said in a weary voice.

"There's no need to," Garvy said quickly. "The whole thing's over. There's no harm done to you—you're back with your family, your reputation's clear—your wife will love you and trust you all the more!"

"No harm done," Sanders repeated in a low, oddly laughing voice that sent a blade of fear through Garvy. "No harm done . . ." With seeming pain he raised the shotgun to his shoulder and sighted down the long barrels at Garvy.

"Sanders, wait! You've no reason! I don't even know you! I never meant you any harm! Didn't cause you any harm—everything's the way it was before! Please!" Garvy's heart was crashing against his ribs. He felt an overpowering urge to run for the side door, yet knew he shouldn't.

"You don't understand," Sanders said in a soft, drained voice. "I loved Janet Windemer very much . . . *very, very much*!"

The two men's eyes locked in suspended time. Then suddenly Garvy did run for the door, exploded into the frenzied motion of panic from where he had stood behind the desk. There was a loud, split-second double roar as, leading him perfectly, Raymond Sanders brought him down in mid-flight.

Thirty seconds later came the sound of another, single shot.

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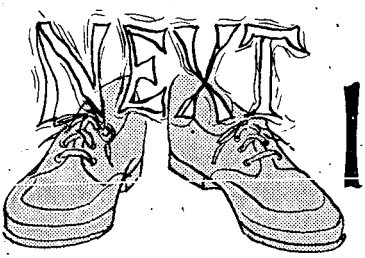
It takes a lot of learning and understanding to step into another man's shoes.



IN LINE

On the day he was to retire from the department, Captain Lars Drager arrived at West Division Police Headquarters at five minutes of eight, just as he had done every working day for the past thirteen years. On the front steps he met Grey and Stanley, two day-watch patrolmen starting their shift.

"Morning, Captain," they said in near unison.

"Morning, boys."

"Last day, huh, Captain?" Stanley said, he and his partner smiling broadly.

"Yeah, last day, boys." After he had passed them on the steps, Drager turned back briefly and said, "Be careful, boys."

The two uniformed men waved and went on their way. They were used to hearing those words from their captain. Lars Drager was a careful cop, and it was his habit to pass along that caution to his men. He had been in charge of West Division for thirteen years, and in all that time he had not lost an officer in the line of duty.

Inside the building, Drager paused to speak with the policewoman on duty at the lobby information desk. "Good morning, Katie dear."

"Good morning, Captain." Katie was Irish and had red hair and a nice body. She gave Drager a brilliant smile and leaned forward on her forearms. "How are you this morning, last day and all?"

"Filled with mixed emotions, my girl; some glad, some sad." He took one of her hands in both of his. "But I know one thing for

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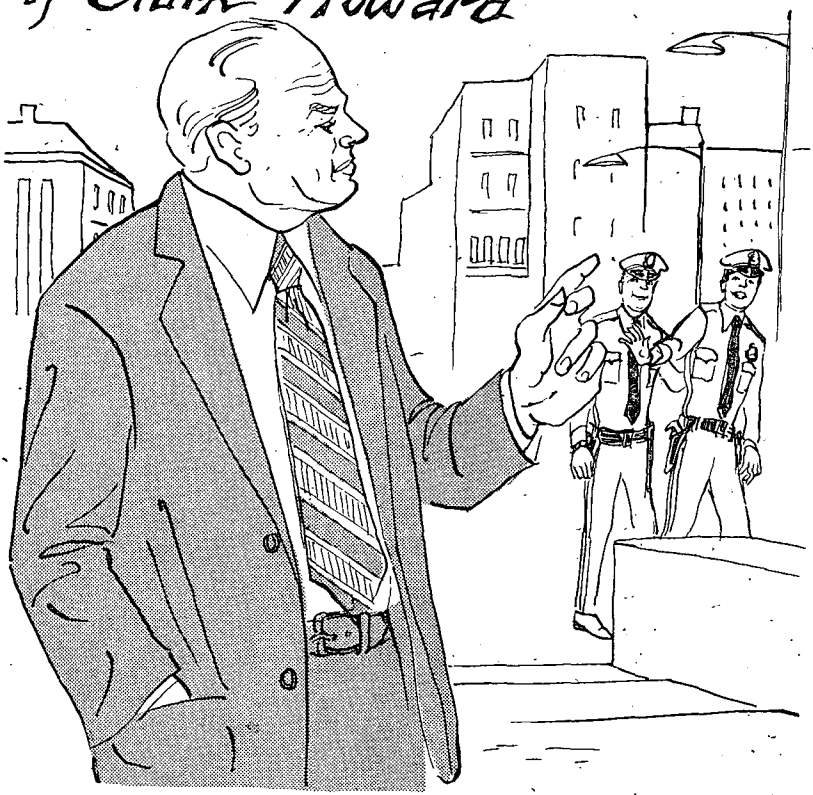
sure, Katie: I'm going to miss you."

Katie's wide green eyes suddenly grew misty. Drager patted her hand and leaned over the desk to kiss her cheek.

"There'll be no fraternizing

by Clark Howard



while on duty, *if* you don't mind," said a mock-stern voice from across the lobby. Drager and Katie looked around to see Ansel, the West Division maintenance man. A former policeman, Ansel had taken two slugs in the hip while trying to prevent a holdup more than thirty years ago. He was left with a slight limp, and had been a maintenance man ever since.

"I'm not on duty yet," Drager said. He pointed to the lobby clock, which showed it to be two minutes short of eight o'clock. "And if you don't shut up, I'll

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come over there and kiss you good-bye too."

"Touch me and I'll have you locked up as a sex pervert," Ansel threatened. He limped over to them, a push-broom in one hand, a cellophane-packaged, silver-banded cigar in the other. He handed the cigar to Drager. "Here," he said grumpily, "since it's your last day, smoke something decent for a change." He shuffled off before either of them could say anything.

Drager looked at the cigar and smiled fondly. "A Meadowlark Corona," he said. He held it up for Katie to see. "That's a dollar-and-a-half cigar, Katie. One of the best there is."

"And why not?" Katie said. "He gave it to one of the best there is."

Drager patted her hand again, then walked across the lobby and pushed through the double doors of the booking office.

Sherm Caldwell, whom Drager had known for twenty years, was on duty at the booking sergeant's desk. "Morning, Lars," he said, using a form of familiarity he allowed himself when no one else was around.

"Morning, Sherm," said Drager. He glanced around the big room, empty except for two juveniles in a holding cell at the far end, and one forlorn, shabbily-dressed woman—probably an over-the-hill hooker, Drager supposed—who sat at an interview desk in the processing area. "Quiet, huh?" Drager commented.

"Yeah, quiet," Caldwell said. He took a sip from a coffee mug. "Well, Lars, when are you going to tell us who's next in line?"

"Next in line?"

"Next in line for your job. Everybody knows it'll either be Stiles, Dize, or Wilson, but nobody's sure which. You know, Lars, if I knew for certain, I could lay some two-to-one bets in the squad room and we could make a bundle."

"The last time I tried to make a bundle with you was on a horse named Blue Rookie at Pimlico," Drager reminded him. "It cost me fifteen bucks."

"Yeah, but this would be a sure thing."

"Blue Rookie was supposed to be a sure thing, too. Anyway, it's not up to me to name my successor. The Civil Service Commission will make that decision."

"Sure, but they'll make it on the basis of *your* recommendation. Come on Lars, who did you lean toward? Just a hint."

"Okay, just a hint," Drager said. He lowered his voice confidentially. "The one who'll re-

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place me is a lieutenant." He gave Caldwell a conspiratorial wink and walked quickly away.

"Hey, wait a minute," Caldwell said, as Drager left the room, "they're *all* lieutenants . . ."

Drager held his last staff meeting with West Division's three lieutenants an hour after he arrived at work. He had long ago adopted a policy of holding such meetings, when they were necessary, at nine o'clock in the morning. That, he felt, was the least inconvenient time for Stiles, who worked eight-to-four days, and would have an hour to get his shift going; Dize, who worked four-to-twelve nights, and would have been able to go home and get nearly a night's sleep before coming back; and Wilson, who worked the midnight-to-eight swing, and had only to hang around an hour after turning the station over to Stiles.

As was customary, the three lieutenants, all with coffee in hand, filed into Drager's office promptly at nine and took seats in a staggered row facing his desk.

"Well, boys," Drager said, smiling, "this is the last time you'll have to look at *my* ugly kisser this early in the morning. You can all thank the Lord for that small blessing."

"Captain, if we had our way about it, you'd stay right there at that desk until you got old and decrepit," said Lew Stiles. He was the serious one of the three; the one who had a degree in police science and considered what he was doing a profession, not just a job.

"I'll second that," Wendall Dize said. A short, stocky man, Dize was one of the best law officers Drager had ever known. Dedicated, methodical, conscientious, he was known throughout the department as "the company man." If the term, "a cop's cop," ever applied to anyone, it applied to Wendall Dize.

"Motion made and seconded," Charley Wilson said. "I'll vote yes and that'll make it unanimous. Motion carried. Captain, your retirement is hereby canceled." Charley Wilson had a tough face. He was a throwback to the days when detectives carried saps in their hip pockets. To him, the third degree was a refined method of interrogation. He was a brass-knuckles cop with a deep and abiding hatred for crime, criminals, and the Supreme Court.

"I'll tell you what, boys," Drager said. "Whichever one of you is sitting in this chair come Monday, I'll let him reconsider his vote."

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The remark sobered Drager's three lieutenants considerably. Each of them *wanted* his job, though not one of them had come right out and said so.

"Any idea yet which one of us it'll be, Captain?" asked Charley Wilson, who approached everything straight on.

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about this morning," Drager said. "I had a call from the chief last night. He told me he would announce the name of the new West Division commander at my farewell banquet tonight."

"But he didn't say who it was?" Wendall Dize was asking the question. After all his years with the department, promotion to captain would mean a lot to him.

"No," Drager said. "He only said that on the basis of what I wrote in your individual recommendations, the Civil Service people had given each of you the maximum fifty points."

"You mean we all got the same?" Lew Stiles said. Having a degree, he had probably hoped that Drager would give him an edge in the written recommendations.

"Exactly the same," Drager told them. "My final evaluation was that all three of you were equally qualified to fill the job. Qualified in somewhat different ways, of course, but I felt each of you, on your own merits, would make a fine division commander. That's why I called this last get-together; I wanted the three of you to know that whichever name the chief announces at the banquet tonight, it'll be the commission's selection, not mine."

There was a moment of silence in the office. Drager, having said his piece, sat looking down at his desk top. The three lieutenants, digesting what had just been said, each had his own thoughts. It was Wendall Dize, the "company man," who finally terminated the silence.

"Captain, I'd like to say personally that you're the finest man I've ever reported to and the finest police officer I've ever known: I mean it."

"I'll second *that*," tough Charley Wilson said.

"Looks like we're unanimous again," Lew Stiles said. He picked up his container of coffee. "I'm sure we'll toast you tonight with something a little more appropriate, but right now this is just from your lieutenants: to your good health, Captain."

The three of them stood and raised their coffee in salute.

At ten o'clock, Drager's son

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stopped in for a quick visit. A policeman like his father, Harry Drager was a sergeant in Central Division. He had seven years in grade, eleven on the force.

"Well, how does it feel to know that tomorrow you can unstrap it for good?" Harry asked.

"I'm not sure," Drager said. He drew his son a cup of coffee from an urn behind his desk. "What are you doing out here?"

"One of Charley Wilson's teams busted a rape artist last night. When they ran his card through Records this morning, they found out his right thumbprint matched an unidentified partial that was lifted from a rape-murder apartment in our division eight or nine months ago. So Fenelli and I came over to pick him up." He took the cup of coffee his father handed him. "What's Ma wearing to the banquet tonight? Judy wants to know."

"I don't know. She's got something new. Judy'd better call her." Drager sat back in his chair. Briefly he fingered the dollar-and-a-half Meadowlark Corona that Ansel had given him, but he decided not to smoke it just yet. "How's the boy?" he asked of his eight-year-old grandson, Lawrence.

"Fine, fine. If you overlook the fact that he inquires nightly why I don't join the FBI so I can ride in helicopters like Efrem Zimbalist, Jr. does on television. I think I'm raising a little J. Edgar Hoover," Harry said.

"Well, you could do worse," Lars Drager philosophized. "The FBI's not a bad career, from what I hear. Takes a college degree, of course." He stared thoughtfully at his only son for a moment, reflecting. "You know, I never wanted this kind of life for you—"

"I know, Pa. Let's not go into it, okay?"

"I had the money for you to go to college. I *saw* to it that I had the money."

"I know you did, Pa." Harry looked down at his coffee. *Don't get me wrong now, the department is fine if that's the best a man can do—*

"Don't get me wrong now, the department is fine if that's the best a man can do. But if he has the opportunity for a higher education, well . . ."

"Believe me, Pa, I'm just as well off without having gone to college. I'm happy being a cop."

"But the money you could have earned as a lawyer or an accountant—"

"When I get a little ahead, I'll make a few smart investments like you did," Harry said. "You know, you underrate yourself, Pa. You

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haven't done badly at all. You've got the place in Florida all paid for—"

"Remember that I don't want you talking about the place in Florida," Drager reminded him firmly. "Nobody knows about that. It was a very fortunate investment that enabled me to buy it."

"I don't talk about it to anyone," Harry said. "But it is a good example of how a person can do well in life without going to college, right?"

"I suppose," Drager said, a note of old disappointment edging into his voice. He quickly controlled it and sighed briefly. "Like you said, let's not go into it. What's past is past. I've lived my life, you live yours." He paused only for the length of a heartbeat. "But the money *was* there."

"Okay, Pa." Harry rushed to swallow the rest of his coffee. "Listen, I'd better hustle; Fenelli's waiting for me in the car with our rape artist. I'll have Judy call Ma. And I'll see you at the banquet tonight."

Drager watched his son leave. A lawyer, he had hoped; or an accountant. *Something* besides a cop. Because the money *had* been there—Lars Drager had seen to that.

At eleven-fifteen, Drager signed out of the station. "I'll be on the street for a while," he told his duty clerk, indicating that he would be cruising the division.

He got into his car and instead of cruising, drove downtown. He pulled into one of several parking levels in a towering high-rise that housed a shopping mall on the lower levels, business offices on the middle floors, and luxury apartments the rest of the way up. Before he got out of his car, he radioed the station and left a number where he could be reached in an emergency. The number was actually a special line maintained by a telephone-answering service which was operated on a confidential basis for a very select clientele. Because Drager was a captain and on twenty-four-hour call, he had to leave a number; he did not, however, have to leave a number that could ever be traced to where he was going.

Walking into the street-level mall, Drager stopped at a pay phone and called the answering-service number that he had just left at the station. When the special-line operator answered, he gave her a number where he could actually be reached, by her, in case any emergency calls came in.

Leaving the pay phone, Drager

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strolled leisurely through the uncrowded mall. Just before coming to a building entrance that would take him to the tower elevators, he happened to glance in the window of a jewelry store. Impulsively he turned into the shop.

"How much is that strand of pearls on display there?" he asked the salesman.

"They're rather expensive, I'm afraid," the salesman answered, his quick glance taking in Drager's ordinary suit and rather drab appearance. "Six hundred dollars."

Drager had caught the glance. He had also noted that the salesman's attire probably cost two or three times more than his own cost. He let neither the man's superior look nor his appearance bother him, however; he merely pulled a roll of bills from his pocket and laid six hundreds, and a smaller bill for tax, on the glass counter.

"Put them in a nice box and gift-wrap it for me," he instructed. "I'll be back in an hour."

He walked out of the store without waiting for a receipt, knowing but not caring that the fussy salesman was staring at him with mouth agape.

Leaving the mall and entering the tower lobby, Drager came to a long bank of elevators. He stepped into a car under a sign that read: EXPRESS—PENTHOUSE ONLY. The brushed stainless steel doors closed with a whisper, and a uniformed operator started the car on its silent, smooth journey upward.

When the doors opened again, Drager emerged from the elevator into a large, elegantly appointed penthouse lobby which served the four topmost suites in the building. Drager crossed the lobby to the North Suite and rang the bell. A housekeeper admitted him.

"Good morning, sir," she said. She did not address him by name because she did not know his name, even though she had been letting him in every Friday for thirteen years. "Mr. Finn is in his studio," she said, taking Drager's hat.

Drager went through the apartment to the studio. There he found Jack Finn dabbing oil onto an easeled canvas in front of a glass wall that provided a spectacular view of the city.

"Hello, Lars," Finn said.

"Hello, Jack. How's the north light today?"

"It was overcast earlier but it's not bad now," Finn said.

Drager walked over and looked at the canvas. It was a street scene from forty years past: cars with running boards, men wearing caps, boys playing in knickers, an

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iceman with a quilted pad on his shoulder. "The old neighborhood," Drager said.

"You recognized it," Finn said in a pleased tone.

"Right away," Drager told him. "You're getting very good, Jack."

Finn put down his palette and brush and wiped his hands, first with an oily rag, then with a damp cloth, then with a towel. The two men left the studio and went into a library down the hall.

"Well, how does it feel, Lars?" Finn asked, sitting down behind his desk. "How does it feel after thirty-four years of it?"

"A little odd," Drager admitted. "A little strange."

Finn opened the top desk drawer and handed an envelope across the desk. "Any regrets, Lars?"

Drager, taking the envelope and putting it into his inside coat pocket, shook his head. "I don't think so. Not everything turned out exactly as I had planned, but that's just life, I suppose." He grunted softly. "You know, my boy never did go to college, and that was the reason for my taking money the very first time."

"Kids," Finn said. "You just can't depend on them. I've got a daughter I sent to the best schools in the country. She learned everything: riding, ballet, French, tennis, everything. Know where she is today? Married to a meter-reader for the gas company and living in a two-room apartment not far from the neighborhood I worked all my life to get her *out* of!"

Finn got up and went behind a bar across the room. He poured two shots from a bottle of very good Scotch.

"I'm glad you've got no regrets, Lars," he said, bringing the drinks back to the desk. "There's no reason for you to have regrets, not if you look at the facts. Your division has less narcotics traffic than any area of the city. It has fewer robberies and burglaries than any other area, and it has fewer crimes of violence against citizens, such as muggings, purse snatchings, and rapes. Sure, it has vice and it has gambling—that's how I make a living, on women and numbers. But those are victimless crimes, Lars; nobody *has* to participate in them. And nobody can get hurt from them. Maybe with the numbers they get hurt in the wallet, but what the hell, that happens on the stock market every day. The point I'm making is that with *controlled* vice and *controlled* gambling in your division, the policemen that make up your force have been able to devote more time to the community's se-

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rious problems. We have nothing to be ashamed of, Lars; neither of us. Agree?"

"Agree," Drager said.

"Good!" Jack Finn lifted his glass. "Here's to the future: your place in Florida, the Cadillac, the boat, and everything else you've worked for. Cheers."

They drank and put their glasses down.

"What will you do now?" Drager asked. "About my division, I mean. How will you operate?"

"The same way I always have," Jack Finn said matter-of-factly.

"How can you be so sure?" Drager asked. "My successor might not see things the way you and I do."

"He does," Finn assured him. "Your successor and I have already reached an understanding."

"You mean you know who's getting my job?" Drager asked incredulously.

Finn nodded. "There are five men on the Civil Service board; three of them belong to me. I picked your successor six months ago."

Lars Drager thought of his three lieutenants: Lew Stiles, the new breed of professionalism, the college man; Wendall Dize, the straight-and-narrow, by-the-book, up-through-the-ranks career officer; and Charley Wilson, the hoodlum-hater, the quick-fisted, the blackjack cop.

"Who is it?" Drager asked.

"I'd rather you found out at the banquet," Finn said. "If I told you now, your reaction tonight wouldn't be genuine."

Drager shrugged. "I can wait," he said, suppressing his curiosity with thirty-four years of police self-control. He rose to leave.

"Take care of yourself, Lars," Jack Finn said.

"You do the same, Jack."

The two men shook hands for the last time.

At the banquet that night, Lars Drager sat as the guest of honor at the head table and listened to one speaker after another praise his thirty-four years' service as a police officer. Men he had worked for, with, and over, all took their turn, following the dinner, to say a few words to him or about him. All of it, of course, was a warm-up to the official farewell speech, which was to be delivered by the chief of police, and during which the new West Division commander would be named.

Drager sat directly next to the speaker's podium, so that as each man concluded his remarks, he could rise and shake hands with him and thank him for whatever he had said. Drager found most of

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the speeches rather tiresome; probably, he thought, because the sentiments they expressed were somewhat hollow in light of the true facts. However, he endured them graciously, and played the role he knew was expected of him. Wearing a tuxedo which he imagined everyone probably assumed to be rented, but which in fact had been tailor-made for him, he sat looking out at the guests, occasionally taking a swallow of coffee and a sip of brandy, and smoking the Meadowlark Corona that Ansel, the station maintenance man, had given him that morning. Beside him sat his wife, Lillian, wearing a new string of pearls that Drager also imagined everyone thought were imitation.

The high point of the evening finally arrived: the chief began his speech. During the first few minutes, while the chief dwelled on Drager's days as a rookie cop, Drager himself sat studying the group at one of the front tables: Lew Stiles and his wife, a pretty, well-groomed girl who, like her husband, probably had a college degree; Wendall Dize and his wife who, like Lillian Drager, was still attractive in her early fifties, but with a hint of worry in her face that all policemen's wives carry to their graves; and Charley Wilson and his date, a smartly coiffed woman of perhaps forty, obviously a career type and obviously taken by Charley's hard-boiled cop image.

Which one? Lars Drager wondered.

He took a deep drag on the Meadowlark Corona, caught Ansel watching him, and raised the cigar so the lame ex-cop would know it was *his* cigar that was being smoked on this momentous occasion. Looking past Ansel, Drager's glance fell on shapely, redheaded Katie, filling out the top of a sleeveless gown with not a quarter-inch to spare, and getting almost as much attention as the chief every time she leaned forward to sip her coffee. Her escort for the evening was a detective from Central Division who was the envy of every man in the room; or nearly every man, Drager corrected himself, moving his right hand over to cover Lillian's left.

Continuing to ignore the chief's words, Drager let his eyes move slowly over the other guests. He saw Grey and Stanley, the two young patrolmen he had told only that morning to "Be careful, boys." Over the years he guessed he must have said that thousands of times to hundreds of policemen as they went on duty. Drager sighed an almost contented sigh.

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Thirteen years, he mused. Thirteen years West Division had been his: two as an acting captain while he was a lieutenant, and eleven as a full captain—*and he had not lost a single man in the line of duty.* He raised his chin slightly. His was the cleanest, most crime-free division in the city—except for the women and the numbers, of course.

He looked over at another table and saw Sherm Caldwell. He wondered if Sherm had got around to making any squad room bets on who the new station commander would be. Wondering that, Drager's eyes returned to the front table and settled back on Lew Stiles, Wendall Dize and Charley Wilson. He rolled the Meadowlark Corona around inside the circle of his pursed lips and thought again, *Which one?* At that moment, the chief began telling him.

"I know you're all anxious to know who your new division commander is going to be," the chief said. "Before I tell you his name, however, I want to announce that as of Monday morning, Lieutenants Lew Stiles, Wendall Dize and Charley Wilson will all assume the rank of acting captain—"

A murmur of voices and a smattering of applause broke out, and the chief raised his hand to quiet the room. Drager frowned. That meant transfers; there could be only one captain in the division.

"I'd like to announce some changes in assignments also," the chief continued. "Acting Captain Lew Stiles is going to head up a new computerized records section that the department has in the planning stages. This new section will utilize the very latest in scientific and electronic methods of locating and identifying criminal suspects and criminal evidence. With his university background, we feel that Lew is an excellent choice for this position."

So, Drager thought. *Not Lew Stiles.* He looked at Wendall Dize and Charley Wilson.

"Another new assignment will be the job of running a special group we're calling the PTF group," the chief said. "That stands for Police Task Force. It will be a flexible, very elite strike unit that we can throw into any emergency at a moment's notice. The man who heads this force will have to be totally dedicated against crime and tough enough to back up that dedication. For those reasons, this job is going to Acting Captain Charley Wilson."

Drager's eyes moved immediately to Wendall Dize. How in the hell, he wondered, did Jack Finn ever get to a man like Wen-

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dall Dize? Then he grunted softly. *Why not?* he asked himself. *He got to you, didn't he?*

"That leaves Acting Captain Wendall Dize," said the chief. "Wendall is one of the most competent, knowledgeable police officers in the department today. He knows police department regulations down to the last subparagraph. He knows the right way for a policeman to do things, and he knows the wrong way for a policeman to do things. Because of his unusual knowledge in this very difficult field, Wendall is being transferred to the Internal Affairs Section, and will take over that group when our present IAS commander retires in ninety days."

A burst of applause followed the three announcements, and Drager turned with a puzzled expression to look at the chief. His frown deepened. Then he glanced past the podium, at another table near the front of the room, and suddenly he knew who was next in line for his job. Knowing it, he felt suddenly cold, and he reached for his brandy glass again.

"Taking over as West Division commander," the chief said, "is a man whom today the Civil Service Commission promoted from sergeant to lieutenant, and who tonight is being made an acting captain. He is a man who can be expected to uphold the fine record that West Division has compiled during the command of Lars Drager," and here the chief smiled, "because if he doesn't, he'll catch hell from two sources: the department and his old man. Ladies and gentlemen, the new West Division commander is Lieutenant—now Acting Captain—Harry Drager!"

There was more applause now and the chief turned to shake hands with Lars Drager, and at the same time signaled Harry to come and join them at the podium. Harry came up and he and his father shook hands while the chief put his arms around both of them.

"Lars," said the chief, "I'm sure that Harry will carry on the same tradition of law enforcement that you've established in West Division."

"Yes," Drager said quietly, "I'm sure he will."

Father and son looked into each other's eyes. For the first time, Drager felt that he and Harry understood one another.

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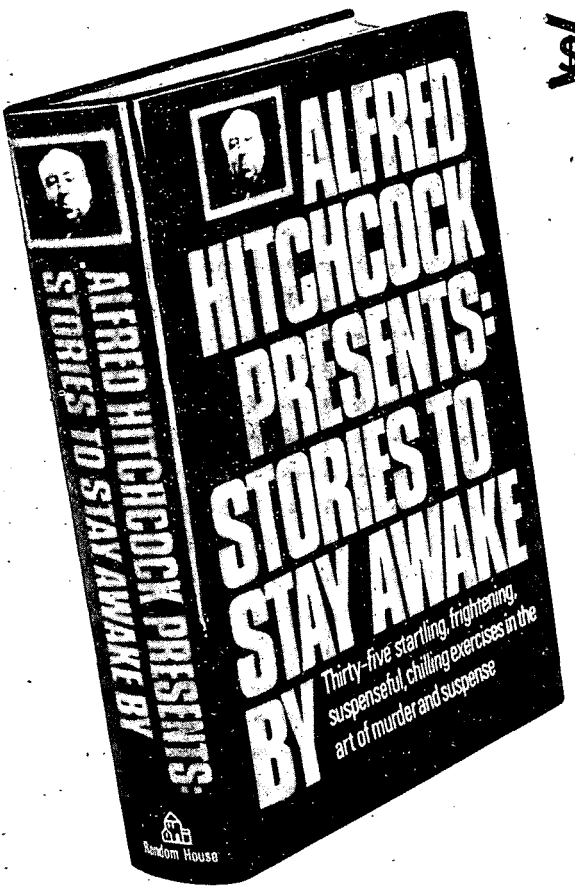
WHILE THEY LAST

BIG

MONEY SAVING OFFER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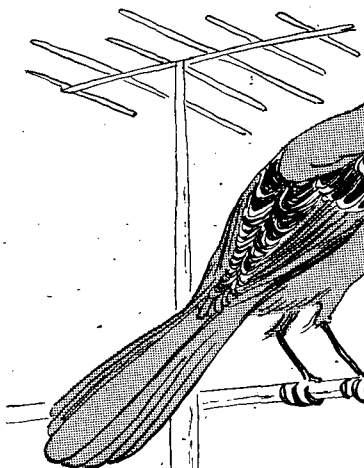
Singular, of course, can mean either "only one" or "unique"—or both.



The Bird (Singular)

by Earle N. Lord

The bird woke me again that morning with its regular cacophony of weird noises. I really should say the bird woke Harry at 5:30 a.m. and then Harry woke me with his yelling. Harry and the mockingbird then began playing their little game. Harry sneaked out the side door with a slingshot clutched in his hands and the bird flew away at the first sight of him. Harry then stomped back into the house, cursing violently, and began fixing our breakfast. I was beginning to feel sorry I had suggested the slingshot to him. It had not done a bit of good. Harry had managed to get only one lead pellet about five feet from the bird on its telephone pole perch. That was all it took to warn the critter, and he

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had not given Harry a decent shot since.

I had not realized that mockingbirds were that quick to learn. They certainly did not act intelligent in other ways. This particular bird was fond of perching on top of a telephone pole behind the house in which I was being held. From there he emitted a constant torrent of discordant bird calls from dawn to dusk. I often wondered when he had time to eat and if he ever participated in the care and feeding of the young birds whose nest he was apparently guarding. I knew from some stray reading that he was not singing because he was happy but because he was warning away other male mockingbirds from his square block of territory. I could not understand, though, why he had to keep it up sixty minutes out of every hour.

I did not think much of the bird's singing ability, either. As a professional musician since age eleven, I did not like his phrasing or melodic production at all. All he was really good for was note production, but he did not care which notes went together. He combined lovely notes and tones with ear-grating squawks, screeches, and discords.

The bad thing for me was that I had to listen either to him or to the radio or TV. Being blind and with nothing in braille in the house to read, all I could do was listen. Sometimes the radio with its commercials was worse than the bird. TV was more interesting. Trying to puzzle out what was going on from the dialogue and sound effects was fun at times.

Sometimes I could talk to my captor, Harry. This was real entertainment for me. I had never met a real New York gangster before, and Harry was real.

Every morning Harry would bring in breakfast on a tray, place it on a card table alongside the bed, unlock the handcuff that chained me to the metal bedpost, and then talk a little while I ate.

This morning, he was still fretting about the bird.

"How are you this morning, Harry?" I said. "The sausages smell lovely. Thank you for getting them."

"I have a splitting headache. That damn bird woke me up in the middle of the night again and I never went back to sleep. I think he sings in *his* sleep."

"How close did you come with the slingshot?"

"I didn't even get off a shot. Now when he sees me come out, he swoops down from the top of the pole and keeps it between me and his noisy little yapper. What I

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need is a shotgun, both barrels."

"How would you get a chance to fire at him?" I asked as I wolfed down my sausages and eggs. Harry was a first-rate short-order cook.

"I'll sneak out at four in the morning and wait for the dawn. I may do that when I get rid of you."

"That should be soon, huh? What do you hear from my manager?"

"I think that fruitcake is stalling, Fernando. If you get out of this alive, I advise you to tie a can to him. He says he's having trouble getting the money, that all your dough is tied up."

"Well, $100,000 is a lot of money, Harry. I certainly don't have anything like that in a bank account. My scratch goes into raw land and apartment buildings."

"If your manager doesn't come up with some bills in a day or so, Eddy is going to call the whole thing off. He's not a patient man. Eddy likes to keep moving."

I did not feel as if my life had just been threatened, but I knew it had. Harry spoke of my death so matter-of-factly, it was hard to worry about it. I listened to another plane take off and wondered where I was.

You might not think a blind person can feel lost. I've had people tell me that. We probably feel the sensation more than a sighted person. We are extremely dependent on familiar surroundings. I had gotten off the plane at L.A. International Airport, had been met in the terminal satellite by Harry who told me my manager had sent him, and had been driven to this home near the airport and chained to a bed. When I asked Harry what had happened to the man my manager had really sent, Harry muttered that the chump had had a very serious accident. So I would not be singing and playing the guitar at the Greek Theater tonight. I loved that place! It was out-of-doors and smelled like the woods, and the people who came there were warm and friendly.

Harry spoke. "You know, it's hard to believe you can't see. You look like you can see that food you're eating."

"I'm enjoying its fragrance, Harry. You learn to adjust. Spend enough time here and you'd probably learn to love that bird, even."

"That'll be the day, friend," Harry growled in low, vicious tones. "If I had to live here, either he'd die or I'd go bananas. I'll be glad to get back to the city where they don't have any of these airborne maniacs serenading

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you twelve hours a day and half the night."

"I hear they sing all night here when there's a full moon," I said ever so innocently.

"I'd almost pray we're out of here before that happens," Harry said fervently as he picked up my dishes and moved them out of the room. I hoped he would forget the handcuffs, but he was back in a minute, chaining me to the bed and locking the door behind him.

Feeling absolutely helpless is not an unknown thing to a man without sight, but I had not known it for several years. With my present income I could avoid it most of the time. I lay back on the bed and listened to the bird singing freely outside. I wondered if he would sing in a cage. Probably not. I tried to pick out some sort of pattern to his song, but as usual there was no human melody to be heard. The bird really did have a maniacal element to his song. After several lovely little trills as melodious as anything a meadowlark could sing, he would top off his production with something that sounded like "teeble didy teeble reet squark," would screech hideously, then repeat not the melodious trill, but the ludicrous one. I listened and shuddered. Maybe this is what happens to bad musicians, I thought; they come back as mockingbirds . . .

Another thought came. If I'd had a small part of the sense of self-preservation that mockingbird had, I would not be now chained to a bed in a strange house in L.A. I had walked right into this. I had not realized anything was wrong until Eddy had led me into the bedroom and put the cuff on my right hand.

"Guzman," he said, getting right to the point, "you have been kidnapped. We are telling your manager to give us $100,000 in small bills. Otherwise we are going to kill you in this room and bury you in the back yard. We may do that anyway if you don't cooperate with us one hundred percent."

I didn't like Eddy. He had a mean voice and a nasty disposition.

The bird moved away and I listened to the planes taking off. That noise didn't make me feel any better. It symbolized large groups of happy people flying away on vacation or business trips.

A new sound came. It was Eddy's Plymouth Duster, backing carefully into the garage behind the house. I can recognize over thirty models of cars by their sound alone. Eddy walked into the house. His steps were quicker than

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usual, and my heart began to pound. I could feel the blood coursing through my ears. Eddy had not shut the garage door behind him. That meant he was leaving soon, a break in his daily routine.

I listened to the two of them mumbling in the front room for a minute, then they began walking down the hall toward my room. I began to get really frightened now. I knew they were going either to kill me or set me free.

A key slid into the lock, the lock clicked and the door opened slowly with a little squeak that did my nerves no good.

"Hello, Eddy," I said facing them with a smile. "I hope you have some good news for me. Did he raise the money?"

I waited a few hundred years for Eddy's answer, then he spoke slowly. He was toying with me. "I heard from your manager, Guzman. Guess what he did?"

"He gave you the money," I said with a sigh of relief.

"How did you know that?" Eddy said with an annoyed edge to his normal monotone.

"You sound pleased with yourself, Eddy. That means things went the way you planned them. If you were planning to kill me, I don't think you would give me any warning by talking about it. You would just simply do it."

"You see a lot for a blind man, buddy," Eddy said flatly. "You can thank your friend, Harry, that I don't get rid of you right now. If I were doing this alone, you wouldn't live to tell this story."

"What can he say, Eddy?" Harry said as he unchained me and handed me a coat. "This is certainly one mark who can't describe us."

They led me out of the house and put me in the car. Eddy was driving; I could tell by his scent. This worried me because I did not like being alone with him. He was liable to throw me over a cliff.

Before we left, Eddy leaned out of the door window and whispered to Harry. "Remember, you stay here for two more days. Let people know the house is still occupied. The owners will come back next Sunday. I'll see you at Charlie's for the payoff."

Then he turned to me. "You probably heard all of that. If you don't want a bullet between your eyes someday when you're all alone up on that stage, you'd better dummy up about anything you know about Harry and me. You got that?"

"Got it," I said softly.

"Listen carefully if you want to live right now. I have a silencer on this gun and I'll use it if you

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don't follow my directions closely."

"I am listening carefully," I said.

"I'm going to drive you down by the beach and let you out where there aren't any people around. I want you to sit down until you can't hear the car, then start walking back up the road. It's a sandy road without any traffic. After you walk about two blocks, you will run into some people by the firepits."

I replied I would do what he said. I listened to the car leave the main highway after a few minutes' driving. I smelled barbecued wieners for a moment and listened to the surf, a beautiful sound. I heard sea gulls cry at the screaming roar of a jet taking off over us as Eddy turned the car around on the sandy road.

"Open the door and step out, Guzman," he said.

"Thank you for not killing me, Eddy," I said as I stepped out of the car.

"You can thank Harry and your manager, not me," Eddy replied quietly in that matter-of-fact voice of his, and drove away.

I sat down in the sand and listened to the car drive back up the sandy road. I waited until I could hear its engine no more, then stood up and started walking joyously down the road. The sun was warm. The air was fresh and clean. The sound of the ocean was ecstatically beautiful. I smelled frankfurters roasting over open fires again, and stopped and breathed in the rich fragrance like perfume.

I heard voices nearby and started to yell for help when a young feminine voice spoke up to the seaward side of me.

"Say, aren't you Fernando Guzman, the singer?"

"Indeed I am, Miss," I said happily and, facing my questioner, began to cry, to my deep embarrassment. "You must forgive me. I have never before been rescued by a girl with such a lovely voice."

An hour later I was in the West L.A. divisional headquarters of the L.A.P.D., being questioned by several members of the F.B.I. and by a lone representative of the local police.

I told them all I knew about Harry and Eddy, that they were both Easterners, probably New Yorkers, that Harry was my height, about five feet eight and weighed about 170, and that Eddy was taller and weighed less. I could tell by the sounds they made when they walked, and by where their voices came from when they spoke. I told them about the Duster that Eddy drove,

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and that it needed a good tune-up.

I said that Harry used Score as a hair dressing and that Eddy's hair was turning gray. That got a rise out of the huge police sergeant, a man named Brennan.

"How do you know that?" he blurted out. He was unhappy about the F.B.I. being in his territory.

I turned toward him and remembered to tilt my head back when I spoke to him. He was at least six feet four. "He wears the same kind of hair dressing you do. It keeps the hair from going gray. You want the brand name?"

He said he already knew the brand name, and one of the F.B.I.'s started to chuckle at this. The other one whispered sharply for him to knock it off. He apparently knew the local cop was angry about their participation in the case.

I described listening to the planes taking off from the airport and about Harry's war with the mockingbird. I said maybe one of the neighbors would remember a grown man wandering around with a slingshot in hand. The big sergeant left the room at this point and I thought it was because he couldn't stand having to listen to outsiders question a victim of a crime that took place in his area. He was as territorial as that crazy bird that courted death.

I was mistaken. The big man came back twenty minutes later and had a huddle with the leading F.B.I. agent. Then he took over the questioning with authority.

"Mr. Guzman," he said, "stand up and make believe you're back in that bedroom, OK?"

I stood up. "OK. I'm back in the bedroom."

"Face the wall through which the airplane noises came."

I turned in my imaginary room and faced that wall.

"Pretend you're listening to a plane taking off."

"Right, I can hear it."

"Which way does it go, Mr. Guzman—right to left or left to right?"

That was easy. "Left to right every day."

"That puts him in Westchester, chums," Brennan said. "We can get within a mile or two of the house. Let's go while there's still some daylight."

The trio loaded me into a patrol car (an Oldsmobile) and we drove up to the Westchester plateau north of the airport where the planes almost always take off into the prevailing westerly breeze. Brennan parked the car and opened the windows.

"Now comes the hard part," the huge cop said. "I don't think one

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man in a thousand could do this, Mr. Guzman, but you may be that man. I called an ornithologist at the University of Southern California. He says that most mockingbirds have individual call patterns, that they stay in the same tight little area all year, and that they spread out all over a city a half block to a block apart. Let's see if you can remember that bird-call, buddy."

It was easy. The seventh bird we listened to let loose a series of ascending and descending trills, then blurted out "teeble didy teeble reet squark," and we were home free.

The F.B.I. man made a call on Brennan's radio. Twenty minutes later the block was inundated with federal agents making a house to house sweep. They caught Harry in the back yard of the house, crouching behind a bush, a slingshot in hand. He decided not to take on three F.B.I. agents armed with riot guns. They ordered him to drop his slingshot and he did.

Harry pleaded with them to let him borrow one of those riot guns for just one big blast at his tormentor on the telephone pole. When they told him that the bird had fingered him, he offered to turn state's evidence against Eddy for just one chance at his feathered nemesis, but the F.B.I. refused to be bought. The cool F.B.I. agent who had warned his companion not to chuckle at Sergeant Brennan told Harry in a deadpan voice that the federal government always protected its informants.

Reassuring me they would have Eddy in custody within twelve hours, the F.B.I. pair walked Harry over to a federal car. Brennan led me back to his. As he guided me to it, I heard the bird start his mad serenading from close range and stopped to listen to him.

Brennan began to laugh. "He's doing a victory dance on the TV antenna, jumping up and down."

It figured. I waved good-bye in his general direction. The little feathered monster was giving us the bird.

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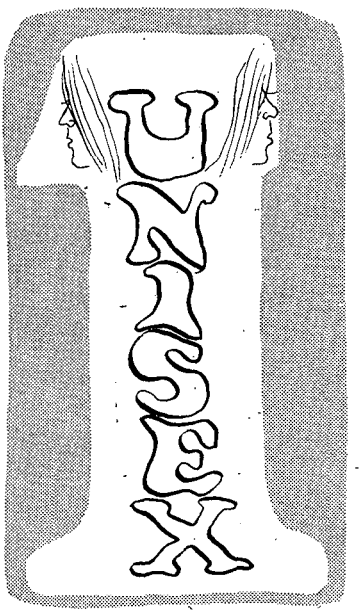
Is it possible that "unisex," notwithstanding current usage, could be a misnomer?



The two viewers, old man Gruber and Mrs. Green, who missed nothing that occurred on Silverado Drive, especially on that important day, could hardly be called friendly neighbors. Gruber despised her, and since every morsel of gossip had a way of returning to him, knew about her various references to him as a nosy old fool, a meddler and even a Peeping Tom.

From his vantage point, a padded chair on the front porch, Gruber heard the scuffling sounds along the concrete, tilted his body forward and observed the hippies sauntering up the street. As on past occasions, they had parked their vividly-colored bus at the end of the drive, and were now proceeding from door to door. Minutes later they approached him, called him "Pop," inquired if he had any odd jobs, and when he replied with a gruff "No," asked if he would give them some food.

They were look-alikes, in fact, duplicates; a young fellow and girl both with hair dangling above their shoulders, red Indian-type bands around their foreheads, and soiled jeans and ragged shirts draped on their bodies. Only the soft, high-pitched voice, clearly feminine, made Gruber realize

by Irwin Porges

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that one of them was a girl. He examined the two, noting with distaste the identical bags that swung from leather straps. Well, he had his own opinion of a man who carried a woman's handbag. Surprised at their gall, he spoke curtly to them. They listened without resentment and then turned to cross the street to Mrs. Loret's house.

The door opened and the two vanished inside. Gruber disapproved of this obvious encouragement of such a disreputable pair, and his attitude was shared by the exasperated housewives on the block. The svelte, bold Mrs. Loret, a widow in her early thirties, had purchased the home recently. She at once made little attempt to conceal a contrasting (and outrageous) behavior: she was eager, lively and flirtatious whenever a man, single or married, approached, and bored and indifferent when the women tried to be friendly. Before the advent of Mrs. Loret, Gruber, on his porch seat, had surveyed the dull routine of Silverado Drive with resignation; the only break in monotony was provided by teen-aged Lisa, at the end of the street. Proud of her figure, she would leave her back yard pool and prance along the sidewalk in the flimsiest of bikinis.

Now, however, things were looking up. The unconventional widow, plus such odd characters as the two hippies, promised unusual entertainment. Too fascinated by events even to think of going inside for his ten o'clock coffee, Gruber waited until the hippies emerged, one clutching a paper bag. When they departed, he resumed watching the ordinary traffic, the delivery and service vans, the day's excitement apparently over. After lunch, as he returned to the porch, he was just in time to glimpse a familiar figure across the street. One hippie, hurrying along, shoulder bag swinging, swerved into the walk to Mrs. Loret's home. The visit this time was protracted; an hour passed and the hippie didn't come out. At two-thirty the van from Nelson's grocery arrived, and young Tommie, juggling a heavy carton, climbed out and marched down the passageway leading to the back of the house.

On Gruber's side of the street, two doors down, the Greens lived, and while her husband put in an eight-hour day, Mrs. Green often sat on a second-floor balcony to survey the activities. From her perch she had seen the hippies and had a clear view of the old man's bobbing head and craning neck. Much younger than Gruber,

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she liked to mutter, "Decrepit senior citizen," or "Snoopy idiot." When the hippies were ushered into the widow's place, Mrs. Green, her lips tight and contemptuous, had murmured, "She *would.*"

Of course Gruber and Mrs. Green were the first to see Tommie, who had taken an unusually long time to deliver the groceries, run down the passageway to the street, where he stood on the curb waving his hands and shouting incoherently. For sheer action and thrills, the day was unparalleled in Gruber's lifetime. Tommie's stuttering words prompted the old man to rush back into his house. There, after his trembling finger twice refused to complete the circle, he managed to dial the operator and call, "Police—get me the police!"

Sergeant B. H. Bertrain, his first and middle names a dark secret, permitted his associates to address him as "B.H." and even endured the repeated joke that the initials stood for "bloodhound." At the widow's home, he and Officer Ryan discovered nothing mystifying about Mrs. Loret's death. She had been murdered, and the method was evident—several blows struck by the familair "heavy object," nowhere to be found. Concerning the blows, apparently savage and vicious, Ryan, stooped over the body, lifted his head to comment, "Somebody was awfully mad." From various cabinets in the den and livingroom, drawers had been removed, seemingly hurled to the floor and the contents scattered about. The widow's purse, opened and with cosmetics tumbled out, lay nearby on the rug.

Later, they questioned Tommie. As though still in shock, he sat on a porch step with his head propped in his hands. He explained in a thin, shaky voice that he had gone around the back with the groceries, "as usual."

"What do you mean 'as usual'?" Bertram asked.

"Regular deliveries," Tommie said. "Three or four times a week. Mrs. Loret would call in the morning and place the order and I always delivered in the afternoon." Her call had been received that morning about ten o'clock. Arriving at the back door, Tommie, also as usual, rang the bell several times and was surprised that nobody answered. He rapped on the door and the kitchen window, and then decided to leave the carton near the kitchen door. Returning along the side of the house, he peered into the window of the den and there saw the body

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of Mrs. Loret sprawled on the carpet.

Meditating, Bertram could find no reason for doubting Tommie's story, at least for the present. The doors were locked and the police had to force one to gain entrance. This seemed to support Tommie's account but, after all, he or anybody else could have been admitted to the house, killed the widow and then left, slamming the door. Bertram studied the boy's face, noting his grief, almost like despair. The emotion seemed too strong, more than one would expect from a seventeen-year-old who had merely delivered groceries to the woman.

"You liked her, didn't you?" Bertram said suddenly.

Tommie straightened, his expression one of surprise, as though his hidden feelings had been exposed. When he answered, his tone was defiant. "Sure I did. She was nice to me, always asked about what I was doing. She wanted me to go to college and be a lawyer or a teacher. Sometimes she'd make me sit down and have a cup of coffee. Then we'd talk for a while."

"I see." Bertram considered.

"There was nothing wrong with that," Tommie's voice surged in anger. "And if you're thinking—"

"I'm not thinking. I'm looking for information." Bertram smiled. "Is there anything else about her, anything of importance?"

Tommie hesitated. "Well, I don't know if it's important. I saw her in town—with a man."

"When was this?" Bertram's attention heightened.

"A few days ago. I was sitting at the counter in a restaurant, and when I looked around, I could see her in a corner booth. She was facing toward me, and I knew she recognized me, but she turned away quickly. I could only see the back of the man's head."

The detective's queries produced nothing further, and Tommie was allowed to return to the grocery store. From across the street, where he appeared to be dancing on the curb, Gruber was hardly a man one could miss. Bertram had been aware of his frantic wigwagging for some time.

The two detectives walked over and were greeted by Gruber's excited demands, "Where's the hippie? Where is she?" When Bertram, taken aback, said, "Just a minute," the old man cried, "I can tell you everything—everything."

In between his repeated urgings to "find the hippies," Bertram managed to extract his name and, after skirting the many digressions, also to extract the story, piece-

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meal. He learned that the two hippies had visited Mrs. Loret a number of times in the past weeks. "Like twins," Gruber said, "the two of them. You can hardly tell one from the other."

"You say they were at Mrs. Loret's place twice today?" Bertram asked.

"No, no. Two came in the morning, then one in the afternoon. She came back about one o'clock. Went inside. I waited. Never came out. Get it? Never came out."

Bertram stared. "Never came out? Oh, I see. Well, there's a back door to the house."

The idea appeared startling to Gruber. "Back door? Hadn't thought of that. But they always used the front door."

"Let's get this straight." Bertram held up a hand. "You told us that the hippies were almost identical. Now you're saying that it was the *girl* who returned alone. How can you be sure?"

Gruber's flow of words halted and he gazed in confusion at the detective. "Girl? Did I say that?"

"You said 'she' twice," Ryan answered.

The old man probed his own mind, apparently without any satisfaction, and then wagged his head puzzledly. "I guess I did. But why? They look exactly alike. Yet I got an impression . . . the one who came alone was a girl."

Bertram reflected, studying him. Gruber was in his mid-seventies, and the question arose, how good was his eyesight? He had confessed his inability to tell the fellow from the girl. Further questioning disclosed that Gruber's view of the single hippie had been from the rear. As Gruber watched, the hippie was going up the front walk toward the porch. What could he have seen to give him a definite impression? Bertram inquired whether it was the movement or perhaps the way the girl swayed.

Gruber, struggling to recall, exhibited disappointment with himself. "I don't know. I feel it was a girl. Sure, it was a back view. But I saw something." He worked to drag the memory from deep in his mind. "The sun was strong and bright, and I think there was a shadow—or a shadow line." He sighed. "It won't come. Maybe I'll get it later."

He needed no coaxing to tell them all about Mrs. Loret, her concentration on men and the fact that a number of men on Silverado Drive found her fascinating. There was this fellow Hoffman, for instance, at the end of the block. Married, too. He came down to fix her plumbing and

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took about two hours doing it. No, Gruber hadn't seen him return to the house, but he could have paid a visit in the evening, couldn't he? When the detectives inquired about other possible witnesses, Gruber, with much grimacing, mentioned Mrs. Green, two doors away. "Female busybody," he announced. "Does nothing but snoop and gossip. She wouldn't miss anything."

Out of earshot, Ryan murmured to his partner, "I guess the old man wouldn't miss very much, either."

Mrs. Green, a thin, irritable woman in her forties, quickly confirmed this. "I suppose *he* told you everything," she said, as though Gruber had unfairly preempted one of her rights. "Prying old fool. You'd think he'd find something to do with his time. Sits there from morning to night spying on people."

In her story of the hippies, telling how the two of them came in the morning and only one appeared in the afternoon, she agreed with Gruber. "He came back—let me see—it must have been about one o'clock. He came to the house, climbed the stairs and waited there. Guess he must have rung the bell. Anyhow, the door opened and he went in."

Bertram and Ryan exchanged surprised glances. "'He'?" Bertram queried. "It was the fellow who returned?"

"That's what I said." Her voice rasped impatiently. "I saw him walking toward the house."

"You're sure? I thought they looked alike. How could you tell, especially from that distance?"

"Are you kidding?" She inspected him with disbelief, as though he were revealing a limited mentality. "They didn't look *that* much alike. Anytime I can't tell a fellow from a girl! There *are* some differences, you know."

"What?" Ryan demanded. "They dressed exactly the same, didn't they? And weren't they about the same height?"

"Oh, I see." Her expression was scornful. "You've been listening to old Gruber. With his eyes—well, who knows what he sees. I'm telling you it was the fellow. I knew by the way he walked." She burst into a laugh. "After all, women have different moving parts. I never thought *any* man was too old to notice that."

She was quite eager to gossip. What about Mrs. Loret and her reputed behavior? That woman talked and flirted with every man on the street. Hoffman? Sure he came over to help her; and his wife didn't like it, either. Then there was the teen-age girl Lisa

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who ran up and down the block half-dressed. Gruber gawked after her until you'd swear he'd fall out of his chair. On one thing she did agree with the old man: the hippies must have done it. They shouldn't be too hard to find, with their flowered bus. They'd lived in a nearby canyon, but were probably on the run now.

Actually, the hippies were not hard to find. Following an all-points bulletin, their bus was spotted on the highway about four miles from the area, and the two were brought in. At the station they sat loosely in their chairs, returning Bertram's gaze with coolness and indifference. His eyes shifting from one to the other, Bertram could understand why the old man might be confused. They *were* almost duplicates, both slim, medium height, hair long and black and bound with a red Indian band at the forehead. The sex difference, at a casual glance, was not apparent; their sameness was accentuated by the clothes, shirt, jeans and sandals, with the baggy shirt concealing the girl's figure. They carried identical leather bags on their shoulders. The two volunteered the names Dennis and Denise; the boy, nineteen, the girl, eighteen.

To the question about a last name, they offered no reply. "Born without any?" Ryan said, humorously sarcastic.

"We gave them up." Denise appeared bored. "Last names are, well, just establishment."

The first names, were *they* real, Bertram wanted to know.

"Real enough to us," Dennis replied, his eyes slightly amused.

Bertram studied them, reflecting that this was an example of a phenomenon of which he had been aware—the desire for anonymity among teen-agers. Melt into the crowd, that's the objective. Become a nobody, one of the gang. Don't find your identity—lose it. Then nothing can be expected of you. The two were equally evasive about their relationship.

"You mean like brother and sister?" Denise asked. She shook her head. "We're just friends."

To other questions they offered terse answers. Of course they had visited Mrs. Loret; she gave them a friendly welcome, the only one on the block who did. She supplied them with food, and in return they cleaned up her back yard. They admitted seeing her that morning, spending about fifteen minutes in the house. Then their agreement stopped.

"Are you denying that one of you came back in the afternoon?" Bertram asked. He caught their quick glances at each other and

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wondered if Dennis' expression indicated surprise or caution.

"One of us?" the boy repeated. "Of course not. We go everywhere together. We never do things alone."

Under Bertram's scrutiny his gaze seemed direct and steady, but was there a jeering gleam deep in his eyes? The situation appeared both intriguing and frustrating. With these two look-alikes the identification of the murderer became difficult, if not impossible. Bertram felt a sharp suspicion. Perhaps they were banking on their resemblance, or even worse, had made this part of their plan from the start. He inspected the blank faces and shifted uncomfortably. He pictured them, dominant and secure, enjoying his helplessness, delighted to play a mocking game with him. The idea was too ridiculous and he rejected it. He was giving them credit for too much cunning.

Hoping that more evidence might lead to a definite charge, he planned to hold the pair as long as he could. After they were taken away, he and Ryan discussed the apparent impasse. Mrs. Loret had died in the early afternoon, around the time when the single hippie entered the house. Simple matter; she—the one Gruber thought he saw—was the murderer; or, on the other hand, was it *he,* the one Mrs. Green insisted she saw?

Ryan was still shaking his head over the two duplicates. "Shows what clothes can do. It's the way they dress and wear their hair. You know what's got us stymied? There's a name for it—*unisex.*"

Bertram grinned. The phone rang and he at once recognized the excited, quavering voice. Gruber had something important, wanted to see him and was chuckling and gloating over whatever he had discovered. No, he wouldn't tell over the phone.

At Silverado Drive the old man waited impatiently on the sidewalk. "The hippies!" he cried. "Did you catch them? Did they confess?"

"We found them," said Bertram. "Now, what have you got?"

Gruber's face was gleeful. "I want you two to stand here." He tugged at Bertram's sleeve, pulling him into place, and then moved Ryan next to him. "Watch," he said. "Just watch, and don't miss anything." He pointed across the street, midway down the block, where the young girl stood poised. "That's Lisa; I've asked her to do this for us." Gruber raised his arm to signal and Lisa began walking.

Baffled, the detectives gazed as the girl ambled along, obviously

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enjoying her performance before an audience. She reached the widow's home, stopped in front of it and turned her back.

Gruber clutched Bertram's arm. "Look. Remember I mentioned a shadow—like a line. Somehow it stuck in my mind, gave me the impression that the hippie was a girl. Look closely. What do you see?"

Bertram stared across the street, at first seeing nothing, but then as he studied the girl he became aware of the shadowy line that stood out against the thin fabric of the blouse. "Of course," he said. "The bra straps."

"That's it." Gruber beamed happily. "I was right, wasn't I? It was the hippie girl who came back."

Bertram nodded slowly, measuring the surprising evidence. "I guess you were right," he said, "if that's what you saw."

En route to the station he and Ryan talked it over. The old man's demonstration revealed that they might now be dealing with a murderess. "What's the saying?" Bertram asked. "Safety in numbers? Our two friends can't rely on *that* anymore."

"There's a better one," said Ryan grimly. "Maybe they've been aware of it. Hang together—or hang separately. The duplicates have quite a little shock coming."

The shock, as it turned out, *was coming,* but it proved to be one of a different and unexpected nature. When Bertram, confiding the details to the police matron, instructed her to bring Denise for questioning, he found the woman gazing at him oddly. She was evidently struggling to control her lips and to repress the amused look in her eyes. "I think you may be behind the times," she said, smiling in spite of herself. "Denise and a lot of other girls—well, they don't wear bras anymore."

Bertram gaped. "Are you sure?"

"Of course. After all, I've searched her. And I'd be willing to bet that you wouldn't even find a bra among any of her belongings."

After she left, Bertram sat in frustrated silence.

Ryan, informed of the latest, commented glumly, "We're worse off than we were before. What do we do for a suspect?"

His legs propped on the desk, Bertram reviewed the sequence of happenings. If the hippies were discarded, what remained? Silverado Drive had a cast of characters; everyone, no matter how remote, must be considered. He ticked them off in his mind: Hoffman, the man down the street who had visited Mrs. Loret; and

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what about Mrs. Hoffman, who had shown her irritation or jealousy? There were others; he was astonished at the list of candidates. Among them was the mysterious man who had shared a restaurant booth with the widow. Out of that aggregation he must match one individual with a *motive*, but if Gruber's vision could be trusted—a big "if"—the field was narrowed, the suspect established as a woman. He reflected. Without new evidence, a solution appeared impossible. Ten minutes later he and Ryan were heading back to Silverado Drive.

At the widow's home they spent little time inside, passing directly to the back door, out to the yard and into the alley. Bertram stood gazing down the long alley, at the houses on the other side and at the intersecting street a block away. The single hippie, seen by both Gruber and Green, had *not* come out the front door. Obviously, he or she had chosen to vanish down the back alley. Now dogged, routine police work was necessary. Somebody might have seen the hippie walking along the alley.

"Strange," Ryan remarked, as they began a house-to-house inquiry. "We've got two witnesses and they settle nothing. Now we're looking for another."

Bertram wondered gloomily if a third one was too much to expect. An hour of questioning produced no results and brought them both to a state of discouragement. Then, at the next home, a nine-year-old boy had a curious incident to report. He had been playing in the back yard at the time of the murder. Hearing someone walking down the alley, he peered through a crack in the fence.

The detectives listened in surprise. "On the ground? Is that what you said?" Bertram asked.

The boy nodded. "I saw the hand first. Then I looked down, and it was there."

Bertram considered and was seized by a sudden and amazing idea. For the only possible answer, he and Ryan hurried down the street, returning once more to Silverado Drive. As the detectives approached, Gruber teetered eagerly on the edge of the porch but Bertram, ignoring him, chose the house two doors away.

Mrs. Green, plainly annoyed, said, "You again?" reacting with impatience to Bertram's explanation that "a little puzzle" needed solving.

"You've found the hippies, haven't you?" she snapped. "What else do you need?"

He smiled. "You're convinced

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that the male member is guilty?"

"He came back alone, didn't he?" She glared at him. "Don't tell me you believe that old fool Gruber."

When Bertram, abruptly shifting the subject, asked for her opinion of Mrs. Loret, she showed surprise. "What difference does that make? If you want to know, I felt the same as the other women. Nobody liked her."

"You're forgetting the men. They seemed to find her fascinating."

She reddened, and her voice rose sharply. "Men! Face and figure—that's all they care about. Men were her specialty. Single or married, she didn't care with whose husband she flirted."

He leaned forward and spoke quickly. "Anybody's husband. Even a certain Mr. Green. Wasn't she overly friendly with him?"

Her mouth popped open. "Mr. Green? Why, my husband would never— Where did you get that crazy idea?"

"I've got a crazier idea," said Bertram. "Listen to this: a woman, angry because Mrs. Loret was making a play for her husband, devised a neat scheme to get even. Everybody on the street knew that the hippies were visiting the widow, so why not impersonate one of them? All she had to do was wear a wig, a red headband, a shirt and jeans. She chose a good time—when the hippies had already been to the house in the morning. She had the perfect witness, Mr. Gruber, and made certain that he would *see* her entering the house. She carried a large shoulder bag with some kind of heavy weapon inside. After she struck Mrs. Loret, she pulled out the drawers and scattered things about so that robbery might appear to be the motive. Then she returned the weapon to her bag and went out through the back door. She marched down the alley and came around to the rear of her house to be sure that Gruber wouldn't see her. What do you think?"

Mrs. Green sat pale and rigid. "I don't think anything," she said, after a while. "And I can't imagine why you're telling me this wild story."

"Of course," Bertram went on, as though he hadn't heard her, "she made a mistake right at the start. She wanted to keep all suspicion away from herself, so she insisted that the hippie was a fellow. Gruber thought otherwise and saw something that proved he was right."

She had partially regained her composure. "Gruber was wrong." She faced him coolly. "You've

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made up a fairy tale. And you're accusing me without any proof. That could lead to a lawsuit."

"Oh, we have all that we need," Bertram said, confidently. "I'm sure we can trace the wig to where you bought it, and I think we'll find the weapon. But that doesn't matter. We have another witness—the best one of all—someone who was in the back yard when you went down the alley, someone who can identify you as the woman who walked by carrying a large shoulder bag."

Mrs. Green's expression changed to defiance and rage. "All right," she cried, "I don't care. She got what *she* deserved. Thought she could steal other women's husbands, like a game—just for fun—and always get away with it. Well, I taught her a lesson. And I'm not sorry."

At the station, after her confession had been taken down, the two detectives discussed the varied events. Bertram, impressed by Gruber's memory of the shadow line—the bra—had somehow felt that the old man was right. If the bra-less Denise were not guilty, then another woman must have entered the house, one with a motive for violence—and Mrs. Green's husband was probably the man whom Tommie had seen at the restaurant with Mrs. Loret.

Ryan grinned at his partner. "Talk about the artful dodger. I notice you did *not* tell Mrs. Green just what our nine-year-old witness said."

Bertram was highly amused. "The little guy did the best he could, considering his age. After all, he could see only about halfway up the fence. Picture Mrs. Green, rushing out of the house, and then, as she hurries down the alley, she discovers she has forgotten to take off her wig to put it in the bag. She yanks at it and it falls to the ground. I guess our nine-year-old doesn't know what a wig is—that's why he said, 'Hair on the ground.' Can you imagine how puzzled he was, peering through the fence and seeing nothing but a hand as it reached down to pick up the 'hair'!"

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An experiment in welding may lead to a deterioration of the component parts.

CLASS REUNION

The banner across one wall in the Plaza Hotel banquet room welcomed "Jacksonville High, Class of '53." The crowd milling around in the room was on the rim of middle age. Temples were graying, bald spots were in evidence.

Tad Jarmon roamed through the crowd. At the bar, he found his old friend, Lowell Oliver, whom he had not seen since graduation. "Hello, Lowell," he said.

Oliver drained his glass. "Hi, ol' buddy," he said with a loose grin. He shoved his face closer in an effort to focus his eyes. Suddenly, he became oddly sober. "Tad Jarmon."

"In the flesh."

"Well . . . good to see you, Tad. You haven't changed much." He held his glass toward the bartender for a refill. His hand was shaking slightly.

"We've all changed some, Lowell. It's been twenty years."

"Twenty years. Yeah . . . Twenty years . . ."

"Have you seen Jack and Duncan?"

"They're around here someplace," Oliver mumbled.

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"We'll have to get together after the banquet and talk over old times," Tad said.

Oliver stared at him with a peculiar expression. Beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead. "Old times. Yeah . . . sure, Tad."

Tad Jarmon meandered back into the crowd. Soon he spotted Jack Harriman with a circle of friends in another corner of the room. Jack looked every inch the prosperous businessman. He was expensively dressed. His face was deeply tanned, but he was growing paunchy. He'd put on at least forty pounds since graduation.

"Hello, Jack."

Harriman turned. His smile became frozen. "Well, if it isn't Tad Jarmon." He reached out for a handshake. "You guys all remember Tad," he said, a trifle too loudly. His hand felt damp in Tad's clasp.

One of their ex-schoolmates grinned. "I remember how you two guys and Duncan Gitterhouse and Lowell Oliver were always pulling off practical jokes on the town."

"Yeah," another added. "If something weird happened, everybody figured you four guys had a hand in it. Like the time the clock in the courthouse steeple started running backward. Took them a week to figure out how to get it to run in the right direction again. Nobody could prove anything, but we all knew you four guys did it."

The group chuckled.

"I saw Lowell over at the bar," Tad said to Harriman. "I told him we should get together after the banquet and talk over old times."

"Old times . . ." Harriman repeated, a hollow note creeping into his voice. "Well . . . sure, Tad." He wiped a nervous hand across his chin. "By the way, where are you living now?"

"Still right here in Jacksonville, in the big old stuffy house on the hill. After my dad died, I just stayed on there."

Tad excused himself and went in search of Duncan Gitterhouse. He soon found him, a man turned prematurely gray, with a deeply-lined face and brooding eyes.

"Well, Duncan, I guess I should call you 'Doctor' now."

"That's just for my patients," Gitterhouse replied, his deep-set eyes resting somberly on Tad. "I was pretty sure I'd be seeing you here, Tad."

"Well, you know I couldn't pass

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up the opportunity of talking over old times with you and Jack and Lowell. Maybe after the banquet, the four of us can get together."

The doctor's eyes appeared to sink deeper and grow more resigned. "Yes, Tad."

The banquet was followed by speeches and introductions. Each alumnus arose and told briefly what he had done since graduation. When the master of ceremonies came to Tad, he said, "Well, I'm sure you all remember this next guy. He and his three buddies sure did liven up our school years. Remember the Halloween we found old Mrs. Gifford's wheelchair on top of the school building? And the stink bombs that went off during assembly meetings? They never could prove who did any of those things, but we all knew. How about confessing now, Tad? The statute of limitations has run out."

Tad arose amid laughter and applause. He grinned and shook his head. "I won't talk. My lips are sealed . . ."

After the banquet, the four chums from high school days drifted outside and crossed the street to a small, quiet town-square park. Jack Harriman lit an expensive cigar.

"It hasn't changed, has it?" Duncan Gitterhouse said, looking up at the ancient, dome-shaped courthouse, at the Civil War monument, the heavy magnolia trees, the quiet streets. "It's as if everything stopped the night we graduated, and time stood still ever since."

"The night we graduated," Jack Harriman echoed. He pressed a finger against his cheek which was beginning to twitch again. "Seems like a thousand years ago."

"Does it?" Tad said. "That's odd. Time is relative, though. To me it's just like last night."

"We don't have any business talking about it," Duncan Gitterhouse said harshly. "I don't know why I came here for this ridiculous class reunion. It was insanity."

"Don't know why you came back, Duncan?" Tad said softly. "I think I do. You couldn't stay away. None of you could. You had to know if anyone ever suspected what we did that night. And you wanted to find out what that night did to the rest of us, how it changed our lives. We shared something so powerful it will bind us together always. I was sure you'd all come back."

"Still the amateur psychologist, Tad?" Harriman asked sourly.

Tad shrugged.

"It was your fault what we did that night, Tad," Lowell Oliver

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said, beginning to blubber in a near-alcoholic crying jag. "You were always the ringleader. We followed you like sheep. Whatever crazy, sick schemes you thought up—"

"We were just kids," Gitterhouse argued angrily. "Just irresponsible kids, all of us. Nobody could be held accountable—"

"Just kids? We were old enough in this state to have been tried for murder," Tad pointed out.

There was a heavy silence. Then Tad murmured slowly, "I used to go past the place on the creek where old Pete Bonner had his house-trailer. For years you could see where the fire had been. The ground was black and the rusty framework of the house-trailer was still there. It was finally cleared away when the shopping center was built, but every time I go by that place I think about the night old Pete Bonner died there. And I think about us. A person acts; the act is over in a few minutes. But the aftermath of the act lives on in our emotions, our brains, perhaps forever. We committed an act twenty years ago. The next day, they buried what was left of old Pete. We're stuck with that for the rest of our lives."

They fell silent again, each thinking back to that night. It was true that Tad had been the ringleader of their tight little group, and the night of their graduation, it was Tad who thought of the final, monstrous prank: "Let's set Pete Bonner's trailer on fire."

"But Pete's liable to be in the trailer," one of the others had said.

"That's the whole point." Tad had grinned, then explained, "After tonight, we'll be going in different directions. Duncan is going into medical school. Lowell's going into the Army. Jack's going to business college. I'll probably stay here. We need to do something so stupendous, so important, that it will weld the four of us together forever. So, we'll roast old Pete Bonner alive."

Tad had pointed out to the rest of them that Pete was the town drunk, an old wino who had no family. It would be like putting a worthless old dog out of his misery.

Because of the hypnotic-like hold Tad had on the others, they had agreed—sweating and scared—but they'd agreed.

That night after graduation exercises, Tad led them to Pete Bonner's trailer with cans of gasoline and matches. As they ran away from the blazing funeral pyre, the screams of the dying old wino followed them.

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"I can still hear that old man screaming," Duncan Gitterhouse said, his hands shaking as he chain-lit another cigarette.

"Tad, you said we're stuck with what we did for the rest of our lives," Jack Harriman sighed. "It's true. I've made a pile of money, but what good is it? I can't go to sleep without pills. I eat too much. My doctor says I'm going to have a coronary in five years if I don't quit eating so much, but I can't stop. It's an emotional thing, a compulsion. Look at poor Lowell there. He's spent the last five years in and out of alcoholic sanitariums."

Duncan Gitterhouse nodded. "My practice is a success. Compensation, I guess. I have the idea that if I save enough lives, I'll make up for the one we took. I do five, ten operations a day. But my private life is a shambles—my wife left me years ago; my kids are freaked out on drugs." He turned to Tad Jarmon. "I suspect you didn't get off any better than we did, Tad. You never married. You're stuck here, in the home you grew up in. I don't think you *can* leave . . ."

They sat in the park for a while. Then they got up and went off to their respective motel rooms—Tad to his big, old-fashioned house with white columns.

In his study, Tad took down one of his journals from a bookshelf. In his neat, precise hand, he carefully described the events of the evening, recording in detail all that Jack, Duncan and Lowell had said. Following that entry, he added his prognostication for their future. "I would estimate that Jack will be dead within ten years, probably suicide if he doesn't have a stroke first. Lowell will become a hopeless alcoholic and spend his last years in a sanitarium. Duncan will keep on with his practice, but will have to turn to drugs to keep himself going."

He sat back for a moment. Then as an afterthought, he added, "I will continue to live out my life here in this old house, on the inheritance my father left me, eventually becoming something of a recluse. Duncan was right; I can't leave. It is a psychological prison. But I am reasonably content, keeping busy with my hobby, the study of human nature, that will fill volumes when I am through."

He put the journal away. Then he turned to another bookcase. It was lined with similar neatly-bound and dated journals. He went down the line until he found one dated 1953. He opened it and flipped the pages, stopping when he came to the date of their grad-

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uation, then he started to read:

"Tonight being graduation," he had written, "I decided we must do something spectacular. A crowning achievement to top any previous prank. Early in the afternoon, I stopped by Pete Bonner's trailer. I had in mind giving him a few dollars to buy us some whiskey for the evening. Being underage, we couldn't go to the liquor store ourselves, but Pete is always ready to do anything for a small bribe. I was surprised, indeed, when I walked into Pete's trailer and found him sprawled out on the floor. He was quite dead, apparently from a heart attack. If I hadn't found him, he'd probably have stayed there for days until someone accidentally stumbled upon him as I had done. I immediately got a brilliant idea for a colossal joke and a chance to test a theory of mine. They say time is relative. I think reality is relative. If someone believes he has committed an act, it's the same to him as if he *has* committed the act. The consequences, as far as they affect him, should be the same.

"This time the joke would be on Jack, Duncan and Lowell. They're so gullible, they'll do anything I tell them. I hurried home and swiped the wire recorder out of Dad's study. I recorded some agonized screams and put it under Pete's trailer, all hooked up so it would take only a second to turn it on. I then went over to talk to Jack, Duncan and Lowell. I convinced them it would be a great idea to burn up Pete's trailer and roast Pete alive. Of course, they had no way of knowing Pete was already dead. Tonight, after graduation, we slipped down to Pete's trailer with gasoline and matches. I went around the other side, pretending to slosh my gasoline around, and reached under the trailer and switched on the wire recorder. As soon as the flames shot up, we began hearing some very convincing screams. It will be most interesting, in future years, to see what effect tonight's act will have on the lives of Jack Harriman, Duncan Gitterhouse, and Lowell Oliver."

Tad Jarmon closed the journal and leaned back with a cold, thoughtful smile.

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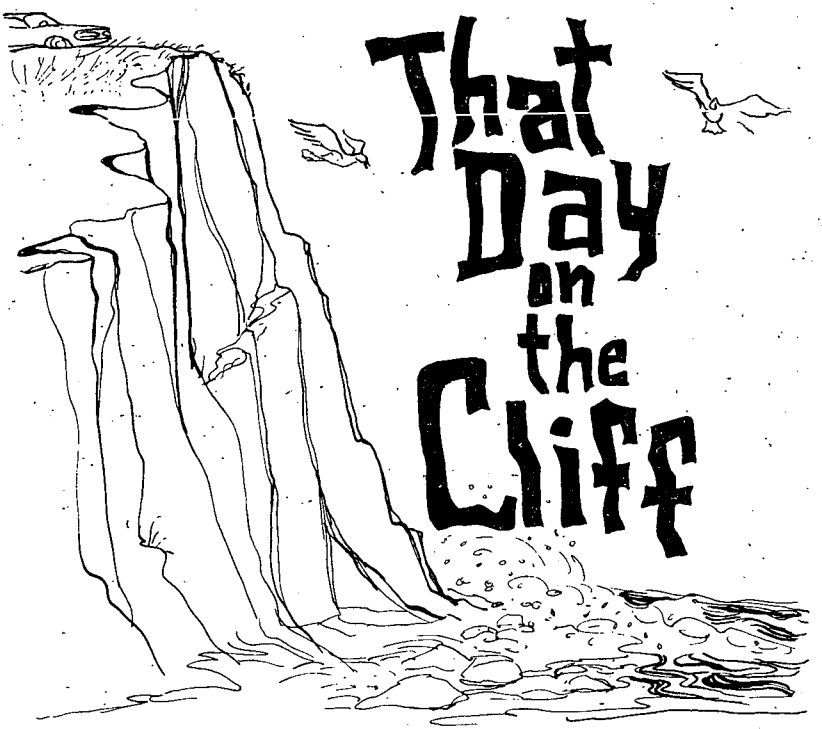
The tingling, frightening taint of fear touches many but, perhaps fortunately, the delicious euphoria of complete escape is rarely experienced.



That Day on the Cliff

She never knew in advance when it would happen, but it was always in that twilight state between wakefulness and slumber. As she drifted off to sleep she would find her arms and legs immobilized as though tightly bound; her heart would pound, her throat constrict as she vainly tried to call for help. A roar would fill her ears and wave after wave of tingling, frightening paralysis would flow through her body. After a minute or so, the

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sensation would subside and leave her gasping, chilled, trembling with terror, and sleep would be hours in coming . . .

"Miss Moran! Miss Moran!" From the dim reaches of time and space the voice called her to consciousness. Struggling for complete awareness, she gradually moved her shoulders, then her head. The numbness dissipated into a feeble shudder; she stretched aching limbs and opened her eyes.

"Are you all right?" The blue-costumed stewardess was bending over her anxiously. "That must have been some dream!"

Margaret Moran shuddered. "It was a nightmare, all right. Did I—did I *say* anything?"

The stewardess shook her blonde head. "You just moaned a bit. I was afraid you were ill."

"Oh, no. I'm perfectly all right now." Margaret spoke quickly. "It was nice of you to be concerned. Oh, how long before we get to New York?"

"About two more hours."

The stewardess moved on down the aisle. Margaret fixed her gaze on the clouds visible through the window. How awful! To have this happen on the plane, of all places! She glanced at the elderly man next to her. He was dozing over his magazine.

She shivered nervously and lit a cigarette. What a homecoming this was going to be, she told herself. She must be overtired or something. She hadn't had a bad one like this since—when? Since right after that day on the cliff, she guessed.

Pushing her dark bangs out of her eyes, Margaret settled back and blew a cloud of smoke at the seat in front of her. *That day on the cliff,* she thought with heavy irony, a euphemism if she ever heard one. Zach would die laughing. She caught her breath sharply.

She had tried so hard not to think of Zach, but now she would have to face those memories all over again. It would be especially bad because she'd be seeing Anne in a couple of hours, and Anne still knew nothing about her and Zach.

Margaret's cigarette burned her fingers and in annoyance she stubbed it out.

Wonderful Zach, she thought. *I ought to tell you what he was really like, Anne. But no, that*

a novelette

by CAROL RUSSELL

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wouldn't be fair. What you don't know won't hurt you. Not the way it hurts me.

She sighed and lay back against the headrest, and suddenly she remembered the last flight she had made, from New York to Los Angeles—how many months ago? Eight? Nine?—when she had been fleeing from Zach.

Zach was Anne's husband—then. She and Anne had grown up together in Great Neck. Their families were close friends, and Margaret's mother and father had adopted Anne when her parents had been killed in a car crash. Margaret was a tiny baby at the time; now she could hardly remember a time when Anne had not been around to lead the way. Even as a child, Anne had a delicate blonde prettiness and a shy smile that enslaved everyone.

Yes, Margaret reflected, Anne had always been the golden girl. Everything came naturally to her, and Margaret could recall more than a few times when she had resented the older girl's popularity. Still they had been as close as sisters—double-dating, giving parties together, going on steak fries and picnics and ski trips together.

When Zach Webster came into the picture, everything had changed—and Margaret relived that deep sense of being left out. Suddenly it had been Anne and Zach going to the World's Fair, Anne and Zach at Bear Mountain, Anne and Zach at Cape Cod and Martha's Vineyard—and Anne and Zach eloping to Virginia.

Everyone thought it was an idyllic marriage. Anne was ecstatically happy. She admitted having been swept off her feet. She positively glowed.

Anne and Zach bought a small house a few blocks away. Margaret left home, too. She took an apartment in Manhattan with two girlfriends and went to work as a typist at one of the television networks. In time she became a secretary, and one day she looked up from her desk to see Zach Webster, complete with football-player shoulders and curly blond hair and sparkling blue eyes, smiling down at her.

It was natural for Zach to be there, because he sold television film programs to advertising agencies and TV stations, and Margaret worked for the program director; and it came to seem almost natural for Zach to be asking Margaret to have lunch or drinks with him when he was in the neighborhood of the TV studios. For the first time in her life she found herself becoming secretive about her life—her friends and dates—when she went home to

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Great Neck on most weekends.

She reached the decision to leave New York after overhearing a blistering scene between Anne and Zach which forced her to admit that she might be the "female who was breaking up their marriage." Without telling either her mother or Anne her real reason for going west, Margaret wangled letters of recommendation to several Los Angeles TV stations and advertising agencies.

Anne finally confided to Margaret her fears about her marriage. "I don't know why we're having these stupid quarrels, Maggie. Seems as if we've had nothing but problems lately. I've been so jealous! Oh, well, I guess it'll all work out."

That night, her last in the East, while she was falling asleep, Margaret had the first paralytic experience. With the sound of her heartbeat reverberating in her ears, she strained to utter any kind of sound. At first, unable to move even a muscle, she thought she was dying, but finally the roaring and tingling abated and she managed to break through the spell and sit up in bed.

Margaret curled up in a chair by the window and sat there for hours, lit cigarettes that she scarcely smoked, listened to the soft rhythm of a rain that normally would have lulled her to sleep. In the morning she boarded the jet for Los Angeles. When at last she arrived at International Airport, she felt that a new experience lay spread out before her.

She had little difficulty in finding a job at a TV film production company and an apartment within walking distance. She moved into an inexpensively furnished "single" in an old Hollywood mansion which had been converted into an apartment building. Her living expenses were low enough that she could send money home to her mother regularly. She made a few friends and had settled into a moderately comfortable but uninspired routine when Zach suddenly appeared one night at her door.

He had left his New York-based company and accepted a position with the sales department of a TV station in Los Angeles—for less money but greater freedom, he said. Anne had refused to come with him.

"She says she was here once and didn't like it," he confided over drinks at the Yamashiro.

Margaret looked down over the lights of Hollywood. "Yes, we took our vacations together and came out to the Coast one summer. I remember she didn't care much for L.A. I'm getting to like

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it, though. Just look at that view!"

Zach seemed not to hear her. "Actually, it's probably for the best. We'll have lots of time to think. We just about came to the parting of the ways before you left. Now it'll be that much easier for *us*."

Margaret frowned. "Zach, I—I left New York because it wouldn't have been fair to Anne if I'd kept on seeing you. I was afraid I was wrecking your marriage."

"I'm crazy about you, too." He smiled.

"Oh, be serious!"

"Okay." He shrugged. "I'm *not* crazy about you. Why do you think I followed you out here, then?" He leaned forward and took her hand. "My marriage was in trouble long before you came into the picture. Anne simply wouldn't see it. When you moved away, I realized it was you I loved. So I looked around for a job out here."

"But—"

"With my experience, it wasn't too hard to get one. I wanted to be near you, see you as often as you'd let me. When Anne refused to come along, I just left without her."

"And now?"

"I expect we'll get a divorce. She's thinking it over."

For the first time since she had left New York, Margaret felt that the weight of unhappiness over her relationship with Zach had been lifted from her mind. "I feel sorry for Anne," she said, "but at the same time I'm glad you're here. If you didn't have a good marriage, maybe it's better for everybody if it's all over."

Zach smiled. "No more qualms?"

She shook her head.

After that evening Margaret saw Zach constantly. They explored Los Angeles together, taking in the art galleries on La Cienega, the concerts and plays at the Music Center, the nightclubs along the Sunset Strip. They drove down to Disneyland, visited the San Diego Zoo, toured Marineland and Ports o' Call and the *Queen Mary*. Margaret had never been so happy. Zach rented a beach cottage and they spent lazy weekends walking along the beach front, gathering driftwood for the fireplace, listening to the cries of the sea gulls and the sloshing of the waves. Margaret reflected on how their lives had changed since the move west. A closeness had grown between them, a precious intimacy that she had not believed possible. At last she could see some direction and purpose in her life.

Then one Friday she learned

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that they *had* to make more definite plans, and she resolved to talk seriously with Zach about their future together.

On the following day they drove up above Malibu for a picnic. Zach parked his new white convertible at the end of a road that almost ran off the cliff. He lifted the ice chest out of the trunk and opened the car door for Margaret. "Still the New Yorker, aren't you? Gloves and everything. Even with a pants suit." He shook his head as if in annoyance.

"The wind's chilly up here." She followed him across the grass to a rock formation. Only the blue sky was visible ahead of her; suddenly the world dropped away, and below was the deep expanse of the Pacific. Startled, she jumped back, and Zach caught her arm. Margaret's heart was pounding. She took his hand and they strolled along on the grass. "By the way, Zach," she said at last, taking a deep breath, "I've been wondering. Have you heard any more from Anne about when the divorce is coming through?"

Zach hesitated. "Well . . . no, not exactly. The fact is, I've been in touch with Anne several times; I have a letter right here, in fact. She wrote it on the Fourth of July, and she talks about watching the fireworks all alone, and wishing that I'd been there with her."

"How touching. So?"

"So, she wants to come out here and try to make a go of it again." He set the ice chest down on the grass. "This seems as good a spot as any."

"For what? Oh." The picnic. "But what about—"

"Our plans? We'll just have to wait and see."

"But, Zach, you said she was filing for a separation."

"I just told you she doesn't want a separation anymore."

"Or *you* don't! Is that it?"

He spread his hands. "She does have the right to change her mind, you know."

"What right does she have?" Margaret's voice rose. "She gave you up!"

"Apparently she's decided she doesn't *want* to give me up."

"What do *you* want? Are you going back to her?" Margaret looked at him for a moment and then turned her back on him, staring out across the Pacific, wishing suddenly that the pounding surf could drown out his answer—because she knew what it would be. Even when she felt his hand on her shoulder, she would not turn around.

"I've been trying to find a way to say this for days," Zach said gently. "I honestly don't know at

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this point whether we're going to get a divorce or not. But in all fairness, you'll have to admit that it's up to us—Anne and me, I mean—to decide where we're going from here." He shrugged again. "I know this must sound awfully unfair to you. I didn't plan it this way, believe me."

She stared disconsolately down at the craggy coastline. "No, of course not." Her voice broke.

"Hey, what's this? A tear on that pretty cheek? Come on, it's not the end of the world. You're a pretty girl, intelligent, you have everything going for you. You'll meet someone; some lucky guy will come along. You just wait and see."

Her throat ached with the effort to hold back the tears and control her voice.

"Oh, sure. No problem—except who's going to take care of Zach, Junior while I'm out looking for this lucky guy?"

Zach spun her around to face him. "Zach, *Junior*! Are you positive?"

Margaret nodded. "The lab called with the results yesterday. I was—well, I was afraid to tell you before I knew for sure."

He shook his head. "I don't know how I'm going to bail you out of this one."

"Bail me out? Zach, you're in this thing right along with me!"

"Oh no, I'm not. This is strictly your problem. I'll help you as much as I can, but—"

"Oh, Zach!" Margaret took a step toward him and put her arms around his waist, hiding her face against his shoulder. The rough tweed of his jacket was comforting, but then his hands were gripping her wrists and firmly holding her away from him. She looked up at him, surprised.

"Actually, with all the pills you take, I should think you could have prevented this." He was smiling wryly.

"Zach, I told you I can't take the Pill. I get sick."

He sighed. "Well, you can probably get into one of those clinics."

Margaret grew cold. "Oh, no, Zach—I couldn't do that!"

"Don't worry. It won't be so bad. You'll get used to the idea."

She stared at him. "And it would make everything so much easier for you, wouldn't it? I wonder what Anne would say, if she knew. I wonder whether she'd even *want* you back!"

"That's hardly the issue now, since she does. Telling her about this would only hurt her."

"Oh, *she's* to be protected, at all costs! Now *I'm* in the way, I suppose!"

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Zach met her gaze steadily. "*You* said that."

"I don't believe she's changed her mind at all. Let me see that letter."

He pulled an envelope out of his inside pocket and she recognized Anne's scrawl. Margaret put out her hand to take it, but Zach held the envelope above her head. "I don't think you want to read this. Anne can be a bitch sometimes. Come on, now. Be sensible."

"Give it to me!" But as she was reaching for it, he suddenly grinned and held it behind his back. She lost her balance and stumbled against him. Zach stepped backward and his foot slipped on the smooth rock. "Hey!" he cried, and with arms flailing, he fell. She darted forward and grabbed for his hand, but before her horrified eyes he disappeared over the edge of the cliff.

"Zach!" she shrieked. Dropping to her knees, she peered over the precipice. His terrified shout echoed again and again in her mind; finally she knew it was her imagination because she could see him lying on the sharp rocks at the edge of the ocean. A wave touched his body. Far off she could hear the cry of a sea gull.

Zach did not move.

Margaret could not say how long she knelt there, but when she stood up, her hands ached from clenching. She looked down at her clothing. Her pants legs were scuffed and dirty from the rocks, and her knees hurt. Trembling, she limped to the car, picked up her handbag, and hurried down the road. Once she turned her ankle, almost falling, and stopped to rest for a moment. Not far away stood a small, white Spanish church. "I wonder if I should ask for sanctuary?" she said aloud. Then with a bitter smile she hobbled onto the highway. Cars sped past her as she limped along the asphalt, but she paid no attention, even to the repeated beeping of a Volkswagen bus. In a moment, the colorfully decorated vehicle pulled up ahead of her and a bearded young man opened the door and offered her a ride. She could see that the car was filled with long-haired, casually dressed young people. They were going to Ensenada, they said, and would be glad to drop her anywhere she wanted to go along the way. Margaret gratefully climbed into the front seat and asked them to let her off in Santa Monica. She could catch a bus back to Los Angeles.

She reached the haven of her apartment just in time. Reeling

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with nausea, gripped by stabbing pains, Margaret stumbled into her tiny bathroom. By evening the problem of Zach, Junior no longer existed.

For the rest of the weekend Margaret lay huddled on her studio couch, rousing herself occasionally to make a cup of tea or heat a little soup. On Sunday afternoon a radio newscast carried a story about a man who had fallen to his death from a cliff near Malibu. His name was being withheld

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"pending notification of next of kin." A white convertible had been discovered at the end of a dead-end road near the cliff. Police were trying to trace a woman companion.

With shaking fingers Margaret switched from station to station, but no new details were reported, and she finally turned off the radio. How did they know a woman had been with him? Could those youngsters who had given her a ride down the Coast Highway have turned her in? Not very likely, she decided. They probably would never connect the bedraggled woman on the highway with Zach's death, even if they did hear about it. Thank God she was "still a New Yorker," as Zach had put it; at least she had left no fingerprints in the car, and she had her handbag. But had she forgotten a handkerchief, a scarf, something else?

Margaret lay awake for hours, smoking nervously; at last, in desperation, she swallowed two sleeping pills. On Monday she phoned her office to say she was ill. That evening her mother called to tell her about Zach's death. Anne could not come to the phone; she was under sedation. Margaret explained that she had the flu and would be unable to come east for the funeral.

Later in the week, as soon as she felt strong enough, she went through her apartment, destroying everything that could possibly suggest that she was more to Zach than his sister-in-law. The most difficult task was burning the snapshots she had taken of him a few weeks earlier, but she had no need of them any longer; his face was engraved on her memory as it looked when he toppled over the edge of the cliff.

The one piece of evidence still in her possession that might link her to Zach's death, in case someone might report having seen her in the Malibu area, was the outfit she had worn. The house she lived in had no incinerator or furnace. Finally, when she was able to leave the apartment, she bundled the clothes and took the package to a Goodwill collection station.

The uncanny paralytic incident recurred two or three times, leaving her breathless and frightened. She considered seeing a doctor, but shrank from the prospect of answering questions and submitting to an examination. After a week she returned to work, but the job which she had enjoyed so much now brought her no pleasure. Each day ran into the next, and each week was as dismal as her now empty life.

Occasionally someone from her

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office suggested a drink or a movie, but Margaret, with no desire for company and no wish to become involved again, refused all invitations. She started renting a car on weekends, driving around the area to visit local points of interest which she and Zach had missed seeing. In general, she avoided the coastline, but one Sunday she did venture down the Pacific Coast Highway to Tijuana. This was a trip she and Zach had planned to take together, but the excitement of the Mexican fiesta was meaningless without him. She stayed a scant hour, not even leaving the car, and then drove back, just one section of an endless, curving caterpillar crawling toward Los Angeles.

It was on a Saturday several weeks after Zach's death that she drove down the road to the cliff near Malibu again. She had slept badly the previous night after one of her paralytic attacks. For a long time she had associated the strange experiences with guilt feelings about Zach. Perhaps, she reasoned, she could dispel them by revisiting the spot where he'd died.

Without much difficulty she located the turnoff from the Coast Highway and drove down the dirt road toward the cliff. From the car she could hear the thundering surf. Forcing herself to get out, she peered over the precipice. She gasped. Something was down there! Yes, in the foaming spray she was positive she could see a broken human form lying on the rocks. "Zach!" she screamed, closing her eyes as the tears came. She sat there at the edge for several minutes, rocking back and forth, hugging herself in misery, until she could bring herself to look down again. Now she saw that what she had thought was a body was really only a pile of seaweed caught by the rocks in the low tide, but even that inanimate mass could not erase her sense of horror.

Scrambling off the rock once more, Margaret stumbled back to the car, started the engine, and just drove. In a few minutes she came to the Spanish church which she vaguely recalled having seen on that other occasion.

She pulled to a stop opposite the church, sat back and lit a cigarette with fingers that were like thumbs. Glancing up at the white brick of the church, with its red trim and Moorish tower, she thought how peaceful it looked in the afternoon sunlight. Abruptly, she stubbed out the cigarette, took the keys from the ignition and climbed out of the car. Inside the church she could feel a hundred

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years of tradition crowding around her in the richly carved altar, the heavy beamed ceiling, the religious statuary. In an outer aisle, half a dozen people had queued up outside the confessional. How lucky they were, to be able to confess their sins and be free of them!

She sat in one of the roughly hewn pews, in the deepening shadows, until the last of the parishioners had left the confessional; then on an impulse she moved to the aisle and entered the small enclosure. Through the metal grate Margaret could see the dim outline of the priest's head and shoulders.

"Father—" She faltered nervously, "I've been sitting in the church trying to think what to do. I'm not a Catholic, but I have to talk to someone. Would you help me? Please?"

"Of course, my daughter." The priest's voice was low and bore a slight trace of accent. "How may I help you?"

"I-I've killed a man. And I don't know what to do."

"How did this happen? Did you know this man?"

"Oh, yes. Very well. We were in love; at least, I was, and I thought he was, too." She hesitated.

The priest spoke gently. "He was married to another, then?"

"Yes, he was married." She hurried on with a great sense of relief. "He was planning to divorce his wife, and we were going to be married. Then for some reason—I don't understand why—he decided not to do it. We had a quarrel. We were up here to have a picnic, you see, and we were looking at the ocean from the cliff, and talking. We had a terrible argument. We were sort of struggling over a letter—he didn't want me to see it, and I fell against him—" Margaret's voice broke as the enormity of that last bit of physical contact with Zach came back to her. Tears spilled down her cheeks. "I'm sorry, Father."

"Calm yourself, my dear. What happened then?"

She drew her breath in sharply. "I knocked him over the cliff!"

"What a terrible thing!" the priest said softly. "And he was killed?"

Margaret nodded. "He never moved. I knew he was dead."

"But, my dear child, how could you be sure? I take it *you* didn't go down the side of the cliff. He might have been merely unconscious. Didn't you call an ambulance?"

Margaret shook her head bleakly. "Oh, Father, do you mean I might have let him die? I

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never thought of that; I was so sure he was dead! I knew I'd killed him!"

"Do I understand you correctly, then? You never did go to the police?"

"That's right. I was afraid. I knew they'd blame me. They found him later, though. I heard it on the radio. They think it was an accident; they think he just slipped and fell. But I knew differently. What shall I do, Father? I'm so confused!"

"You *do* need help. But I don't know that I can advise you. You really should consult a lawyer."

"Oh, I don't know; I don't know any lawyers, anyway. I haven't been out here very long."

"If you like, I can look into that for you and give you two or three names, at least. Where can I get in touch with you?"

"I don't want to trouble you, Father." Margaret moved back a step.

"It is no trouble, I assure you. Will you give me your phone number?"

Margaret shook her head. "Perhaps I can come back in a few days. I don't know if I'd even trust a lawyer." She started to back out of the confessional.

"Just a moment—"

"Excuse me, Father." And in a moment she was out of the church and running to her car.

As Margaret turned the key in the ignition she caught a glimpse of a tall figure in a black cassock hurrying out the front door of the church. She ducked her head. What a fool she had been to tell him! Suppose he couldn't be trusted? She drove off with a roar and stopped at the highway only long enough to choke down a couple of tranquilizers.

By the time she had returned the car to the rental agency and arrived at her apartment, the tranquilizers had done their work, and Margaret knew what she must do. Thoroughly frightened now, she removed the dress she was wearing and cut it into tiny pieces which she flushed down the toilet a few at a time. Then she steeled herself to wait. She was positive the police would come now.

For days she jumped nervously whenever the door buzzer or phone rang. She imagined that every stranger who looked at her was a plainclothes detective. Several times she was sure she recognized a man wearing a gray silk suit watching her. Even the traffic patrolman stationed on the corner near her office seemed to be acting suspiciously when he tipped his cap at her for no apparent reason.

By Friday Margaret decided she

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was being ridiculous. If the police had any reason to suspect *her*, surely they would have checked on her movements by now! Besides, why should she assume the priest would betray her? On the other hand, *could* he?

On an impulse she telephoned the Catholic Information Center from her desk and asked to speak to one of the priests.

"Father," she said, "I'm doing some research on the Catholic church, and since I'm not a Catholic myself I wanted to ask about something. If someone confesses to a priest that he has committed a crime, and the priest believes that the person is telling the truth, can the priest reveal his suspicions to the police?"

"No," came the reply, "a priest is not allowed to divulge anything that he has heard in the confessional. During the war, many priests in Nazi Germany and other totalitarian countries suffered great torture when they refused to reveal to the government the secrets they had learned from their parishioners."

"Oh, I see. But suppose the person who makes the confession is not a member of the Catholic church?"

"That makes no difference."

Margaret thanked the priest. Her hand ached from gripping the receiver and trembled when she hung up the phone. Perhaps she had nothing to worry about, after all. For the first time in weeks she felt relieved, elated. After work she even stopped to have a drink with two girls from her office.

Later, when she reached her apartment, she found a tall, gray-haired man dressed in loosely fitting tweeds standing in the hall outside her door. He was chatting in a low voice with a muscular young man. They showed Margaret identification cards from the Los Angeles Police Department. The older man introduced himself as Sergeant Andrews and his companion as Officer Hunt. Margaret's heart was beating alarmingly fast as she unlocked the door and invited them in. Would she be willing to answer a few questions about Zach Webster? "Yes, of course."

"Did you see Mr. Webster at all after you came to Los Angeles?" Sergeant Andrews asked.

"Naturally. He was my brother-in-law; that is, his wife—widow, I mean—is my adoptive sister. Neither Zach nor I knew very many people here, so of course I saw him now and then."

"You weren't at the inquest into his death?"

"I didn't know there had been an inquest. I was ill for a while. I

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think it was about the time he died."

"Oh? You were ill? I see." The sergeant made a notation in his notebook. "Did you see Mr. Webster the weekend he was killed?"

Margaret hesitated as though trying to remember. "No, not that weekend. I'd seen him a couple of weeks before that, I think it was."

"Mrs. Webster has told us she was planning to come out here to join him. You knew about that, I suppose?"

"Of course."

"But you didn't go home for his funeral, did you?"

"No. I told you, I was ill."

"Yes, so you did. Do you know whether Mr. Webster was involved with someone here? A woman?"

"He never said so. But of course he probably wouldn't have told me anyway. Why? Do you think someone else was involved in his death?"

"Not necessarily." Andrews stubbed his cigarette out and searched his pockets for another. Margaret dug into her handbag and offered him one from her pack. "Thanks," he said. "Now, do you know of any reason he might have wanted to kill himself?"

"Good heavens, no! You don't think *that*, do you?"

"We have to investigate every possibility," Officer Hunt said stiffly.

"Suicide," Margaret said softly. Then a terrifying thought struck her. Zach had said Anne's note to him was "bitchy." Probably about *her*. Had the police read it? "Did you find a letter, or a note?" she asked.

"No. Apparently he didn't leave a note—if he did commit suicide."

Margaret desperately wanted a cigarette, but she could not light one because she knew her hands would shake. Anne's letter evidently had not been found, then.

"Do you know Malibu well?" the sergeant continued.

"Not very. I've been out there a few times."

"Where were you last weekend?"

"Here." Questions tumbled over each other in her mind. Had the police been following her? Did they *know* she'd been in the Malibu area? What other suspicions did they have?

"—for a drive?" the sergeant was asking.

Margaret coughed to cover her lapse of attention. "Excuse me?"

"I said, you didn't even go for a drive? Last weekend, I mean?"

"I don't have a car." She crossed her fingers mentally. Would they check all the car-

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rental agencies? Were they that thorough?

The sergeant flipped his notebook shut and stood up. "I think that's all, Miss Moran. Oh, one other thing. Did you ever go riding in Mr. Webster's car? I'm sure you must have."

"The white convertible? Oh, yes."

"Really. I understand he bought that car only a few days before he died. I think you said the last time you saw him was two weeks before."

Margaret hesitated. That was a bad slip. "He used to rent a white car." She looked the sergeant squarely in the face. "Are you trying to catch me in a lie?"

"Not at all. If you think of anything else that might help us, you might call me."

She accepted the card he offered her and opened the door. "Oh, Sergeant. by the way, I've seen a man hanging around. He wears a gray suit. Could he be one of your plainclothesmen?"

Sergeant Andrews shook his head. "We don't have you under surveillance."

"Then why are you here?"

"Just routine. We're talking with everyone who knew Mr. Webster."

Margaret closed the door behind them and leaned against it. Her heart was still pounding. How many slips had she made? She went over the conversation mentally. Were the detectives suspicious of her? She could not be sure.

The police did not come back, and in time the feeling that she was being watched faded away. As Christmas approached, Margaret thought wistfully of her home in the East and a happier time that had existed before she met Zach, a time when she had never dreamed that one day she would be sitting in an airplane returning to New York for Anne's second wedding.

With a bump and a loud squeak the jet plane set its wheels down on the runway, rousing Margaret from her reverie. She popped a tranquilizer into her mouth and was ready to meet Anne Webster.

Anne was waiting for her. "I was surprised to get your wire. I really wasn't sure you'd come," she said in a tight voice.

Margaret found herself being held almost at arm's length when she started to kiss Anne. "Hey, you've cut your hair," she said, pretending to hold back in order to look at her sister. "Short hair looks great on you."

Anne touched her blonde curls. "I thought it was time for a new

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me. You're awfully thin, it seems to me. Come on, I want you to meet John. I'm sure you'll like him."

Margaret did find John Da Silva interesting, and attractive, too, in a quiet way. Very different from Zach's hearty friendliness, she reflected during the ride from Kennedy Airport to Great Neck. A layer of fresh snow had fallen, and the car slithered along the icy parkway. Anne was unusually silent, but Margaret chattered nervously—about Los Angeles, her job, her eagerness to get home for the holidays—in an effort to break through the air of constraint surrounding her.

"My, aren't you the chatterbox?" Anne commented when Margaret paused for breath. "California's done wonders for you. You've really blossomed."

To Margaret the remark was as chilling as the wind. "Sorry," she said stiffly.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Maggie, don't be huffy. I didn't mean anything."

"I hope it isn't going to be one of those weekends," John said lightly, "with the siblings screaming at each other."

"Heavens, no," Anne retorted. "Maggie and I have always gotten on marvelously."

"Well, now that she's home again, how about a little peace in the family? Or do I have to take on the permanent role of mediator?"

"But you do it so admirably, John." Margaret spoke lightly, but she was glad for his intervention.

"Come out of the fog, Maggie!" Anne was poking her in the ribs.

"Have you set the date for the wedding?" Margaret asked abruptly. "Your letter just said between Christmas and New Year's."

"Oh, we haven't quite decided. Maybe we'll elope."

John chuckled. "Anne's making a career of indecision. She's changed the date three times already. But seriously, it's going to be the Saturday after Christmas."

Margaret relaxed with relief. Only five days off. Well, maybe she wouldn't have to stay after that. Christmas and the wedding would be bad enough. She didn't think she could face New Year's Eve here. She had counted on toasting the New Year with Zach on their honeymoon.

"Here we are!" The car had stopped in front of the white frame house where the two girls had grown up. Margaret looked at Anne in surprise.

"I've moved back with Mother," Anne explained coolly.

Most of her old friends were at the house, and Margaret was wel-

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comed home, brought up to date on the local gossip, and plied with questions about California until she thought her face would crack from smiling.

John found her some time later curled up in a chair in the small room that was once her father's study. "Hey, the guest of honor isn't allowed to disappear like this!" He grinned and pressed a Scotch and soda into her hand. "What's the matter, is the family gathering a bit much?"

Margaret shook her head. "I'm just tired. I had—rather a bad time in Los Angeles, for a while."

"Oh, sorry. Is there anything I can do to help? I'd be glad to offer a sympathetic ear, for whatever that's worth."

"Thanks, but no, thanks." She smiled.

"Well, if you should change your mind—"

"I'll know where to reach you."

"Any time. You're quite an enigma, aren't you? Not at all like Anne."

"We're not really sisters, you know. For that matter, you're quite different from Zach. I imagine everyone is making comparisons. It's not just that you're dark and he was blond. You seem so much more settled. Zach was the original personality boy." She took a quick sip of her drink.

"A real lady-killer, from what I've heard. Had to beat the girls off with a stick. Even after he went to California, I understand."

Margaret felt her cheeks growing warm. "Oh?"

"You liked him, didn't you?" he persisted.

"Are you asking me if I was one of the girls, one of *his* girls?"

"Not at all. Of course, if you'd like to confess the awful truth, you needn't worry, I won't tell Anne." He grinned wickedly.

She looked at him with curiosity. "That's a strange thing to say. What makes you think I might have anything to confess, or anything to hide from Anne, for that matter? We couldn't be closer if we were real sisters."

"Ah, now you're dissembling. Even real sisters have *some* secrets from each other. That's only natural." He held out his hand to her. "I hope we can be friends."

Margaret put her hand in his for a moment, then withdrew it nervously and turned away from him toward the window. "Oh, look, it's started to snow again. I've missed the changing seasons. That's one of the things I can't get used to in Los Angeles. The weather is just too perfect out there for a New Yorker."

"And I've had a hard time getting accustomed to the cold. I'm

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from California myself, you see."

"I didn't know that. Where?"

He hesitated, and it seemed to her that he was watching her. "San Diego, originally, but for the last few years I've been working the West L.A.-Santa Monica-Malibu area."

"Oh? What do you do?"

His voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. "Investigate murders."

Margaret's hand shook. "Oh, damn! Now I've got Scotch all over my dress. I hope it doesn't spot." She dabbed at the wet places with the handkerchief John handed her.

He grinned. "I shake a lot of people up like that."

"I'm just clumsy. You were saying—you're a private eye? Or a policeman?"

"Oh, nothing so adventurous as all that. I do get to work on a murder case or some other violent death now and then. But most insurance investigations are pretty routine."

"Oh, insurance. Well, I guess we should get back to the party before someone misses us."

John took her elbow as they strolled into the livingroom.

Someone had already missed them. "Oh, there you are! I was wondering what had happened to you two." Anne's words cut across the crowd to them. Margaret was surprised at the shrill tone in the older girl's voice.

"Caught in the act," John said cheerfully.

Anne stepped between them and took John's arm. "I merely thought people might notice."

Margaret was not the slightest bit concerned over what people might notice. She shrugged and turned away with a wry smile. Nothing was to be gained by arguing the point.

The party was breaking up, she saw with relief. It *had* been a strain. She found her mother and they said good-bye to the guests. Margaret caught herself glancing at John several times and was puzzled when she realized that he appeared to avoid meeting her eyes.

She thought of this later when she sat sipping a nightcap in her old room with her mother.

"There's something I don't quite understand—about Anne and John, I mean," Margaret said thoughtfully. "How can a girl who was as crazy about Zach as *she* claimed to be, fall in love again so soon? It's not even six months since Zach died. Somehow they don't seem suited to each other. I just don't get it."

"Oh, you know how flighty Anne's always been. She's never

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really settled down to anything. And I have a sneaking suspicion—"

"Yes?"

"She always was just a little envious of you, dear."

Margaret smiled. "Mother, what does that have to do with anything?"

"Well, I just meant she's older than you are but she's never had your maturity. So she always grabbed at everything that came her way, as if there'd never be another doll, or another piece of candy, or another boyfriend. But there always was another."

Margaret sighed. "I guess you're right."

"People always seemed to feel more comfortable with you, even Anne's friends. That's why I said she was jealous of you."

"Mother, do you know I was never aware that she was jealous of me? I used to be jealous of her! She was much more popular than I was, it seemed to me."

"Well, don't take it seriously if she seems a little huffy. She'll get over it."

"I hope so. She did seem to be under a strain tonight."

Mrs. Moran considered this for a moment. "She has been a lot more—oh, withdrawn, I guess you'd say—since Zach died. It was a terrible shock, you know. She wouldn't even talk about it. And then the police in Los Angeles contacted her, and that didn't help matters. Some mystery about the way he died. They mentioned suicide, and I thought she was going to go out of her mind. Then there was some business about his having a woman with him in the car, and the police were trying to find her. It was all terribly mysterious."

"Did they? Find out who the woman was, I mean."

"I guess not. But then Anne's been awfully secretive about the investigation. It's only since she met John that she's begun to level off a little. By the way, he's from California. Did you know?"

"Yes, he told me. How in the world did they meet?"

"Zach had his life insurance policy with John's company. So John was working on the case with the police, trying to determine whether Zach's death was accidental or not. Anyway, John phoned Anne quite a few times here, and they started writing to each other, and eventually he came here on his vacation. The next thing I knew, she told me they were getting married."

"Oh. What about this investigation, though? The police mentioned suicide to me, too. Was there a suicide clause in Zach's

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insurance policy?" Margaret asked.

"No, it was—what do they call it, double indemnity?—in case of accidental death."

"I didn't know about that," Margaret said. "How much did Anne get?"

Mrs. Moran hesitated. "I don't think it's been settled yet."

The ice was tinkling in her highball as Margaret carefully set the glass down on the night table. So the case might still be open. Did that mean the police weren't satisfied, either? Had John been deliberately baiting her?

"—must get some rest," her mother was saying.

"What? Yes, I'll get some rest, Mother. Good night."

As her mother closed the door, Margaret reached for her handbag and found her bottle of sleeping pills. Two ought to do the trick. Draining her highball, she swallowed the capsules. Ugh! All the Scotch was in the bottom of the glass.

A whirlwind was spinning in her mind. How much information had John unearthed in his investigation of Zach's death? If he knew for a fact that Zach had been involved with other women, he must know about her also. Had he passed these suspicions on to Anne? If so, that might account for Anne's peculiar attitude.

Margaret yawned. A wave of lethargy oozed over her. Pulling the covers up to her chin, she was reaching to turn off the lamp when the door opened and Anne's head appeared.

"Not asleep yet? Good; I've been wanting to talk to you. Here, I brought you another Scotch."

"Well, all right. Thanks. But I just took a pill. So I'll probably fall asleep any second." Margaret sat up and accepted the glass. The drink was a little strong, and she shuddered.

"Maggie, you and your pills!" Anne's laugh was brittle. "Go on, drink it. All of it. You're going to need it."

John was wrong, Margaret decided. Anne is the enigma, not I. "What is it, Anne? What's wrong?"

The mocking laugh pealed across the room. "Nothing! What do you think of John? I have to get your approval, you know."

"I think he's very nice."

"You think he's very nice," Anne mimicked. "As I recall, that was your opinion of Zach. Are you going to try to take *John* away from me, too? I saw you flirting with him tonight. You're more brazen about it this time, aren't you?"

"Anne, I don't know what

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you could be talking about now."

"I'm talking about you and the way you've always gone after my boyfriends. You always had to take everything away from me, all the time we were growing up. Every friend I had gravitated to you. You acted like the whole world belonged to you. *I* was just the adopted kid. Well, you'll never take anything away from me again."

Margaret drank most of the Scotch in a few gulps. Maybe it would help her stay awake a few more minutes. She was finding it very difficult to follow what Anne was saying. "Now wait a minute." She leaned forward. "What do you mean, I'm trying to take *John* away from you, *too*?"

"Don't play the innocent. I know why you went to California."

"Do you, now? Why?"

"It's obvious—to force Zach to leave me."

"Anne, if you only knew, that's so silly. I hoped that if I left, the two of you could straighten things out." She lay back against the pillows.

"Well, you just made him follow you out to Los Angeles. And you'll be interested to learn that I know everything that happened out there." The crisp voice crackled with antagonism. "Oh, yes. I've been in touch with the Los Angeles police. They found cigarette butts in the ash tray in Zach's car after he was killed; your brand of cigarettes, and they had lipstick on them. So I hired a private detective to check up on *you*. That was John's idea."

"John's?" Margaret struggled to sit up again but found she could hardly move her limbs. Her toes were like ice and her legs were becoming numb.

"He investigated Zach's death for the insurance company. That's how we got acquainted. They had to rule out suicide, in order to allow the double-indemnity claim. John thought the circumstances of Zach's death were pretty peculiar. The more he dug into it, the sorrier he felt for me. The poor, helpless widow." She giggled.

Margaret could hardly keep her eyes open. "Too late . . . to talk . . ." she mumbled.

"Yes, it is late, isn't it? But I'm not finished with you. I want you to hear everything. John and the private detective talked to all of Zach's neighbors and the people with whom he worked. It was easy to find out who he was seeing. Your name came up several times. No doubt about it." She put her hand on Margaret's shoulder, as if to hold her down. "I'll bet you never even realized

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what a favor you were doing me!"

My mind must be going, Margaret thought. She could only echo, stupidly, "Favor?"

"Didn't Zach tell you about my letter? I wrote him on the Fourth of July. I remember that, because I made a point about it being Independence Day. *My* independence, I said. I told him I wanted a divorce on grounds of desertion. But you see, if I'd gone ahead and gotten the divorce, he'd probably have changed the beneficiary on his insurance policy, and I wouldn't be getting all that lovely money. John says I'm a cinch to get it." She laughed again. "And to think I owe it all to you!"

"But he said you refused—" The words came out in a whisper.

"If he told you that, he was just trying to unload you, honey. My precious husband had at least three other girls out there, that *I* know about." Her voice changed; a note of suspicion entered it. "Or did *you* know about them, too? Is *that* why you pushed him off that cliff?"

Margaret shivered in a brief reflex attempt to keep warm. Her ankles had become cold, and the prickles were creeping up above her knees.

"Not true, Anne. I didn't mean to do it." She had to force the words out with a shudder. "It was . . . an acci . . . dent."

"Poor Maggie, just a victim of circumstances, aren't you? Too bad you were on the cliff with Zach. Too bad you came back here, too."

"You in . . . vited me . . ."

"Well, of course I had to invite you to the wedding. But I never thought you'd have the gall to accept!"

Margaret wanted to scream, but no sound came. The ice tinkled in her glass. She noticed with surprise that the hand holding it trembled. Somehow it did not even seem to be her own hand. It had no feeling. She tried to will the hand to set the glass back on the night stand, but the glass merely tipped over and an ice cube rolled out onto the blanket.

"You're not listening to me!" Sharp fingers dug into her shoulders, shaking her, hurting her.

"Don't . . . please . . . have to sleep," Margaret mumbled. The cold, prickly sensation had reached her stomach now. Funny, how clear her mind could be, in spite of her sleepiness, even though she had no control over her movements. Her hand lay dead on the covers. She looked at it through half-closed eyes.

Anne suddenly grabbed the ice cube and threw it across the

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room. "You're almost out, aren't you? Good!" She picked up the overturned glass and set it on the night table. "In the morning, when they find you, they'll think you took an overdose of sleeping capsules—accidentally, of course. I'm glad you took one on your own. I was counting on that."

"T-two." It was almost impossible to move her lips now. Her eyelids drooped.

"Oh, two? That's what *you* think!"

Overcome by lethargy, Margaret slipped into the familiar helplessness. Waves of numbness overtook her body. She could almost feel her senses dropping away, one by one, as her muscles and skin and flesh relaxed. Then she recognized that this time it was different. She felt no panic. No wish to struggle. No need to cry out.

With a supreme effort she managed to turn her head slowly toward the night stand and open her eyes. Merely lifting the lids seemed to take an age. Through a haze she could just make out the glass. It was undulating like a trick mirror. A powdery white wisp trailed up the side. Margaret let her eyelids close with a silent prayer that Anne would not notice the sediment, that in the morning they would find the glass and know the truth. No use trying to say anything more—and why bother, anyway? Just forget everything and enjoy this delicious euphoria. A faint smile touched the corners of her mouth, and she slipped into deep, cold nothingness.

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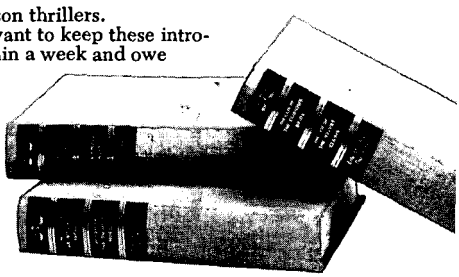

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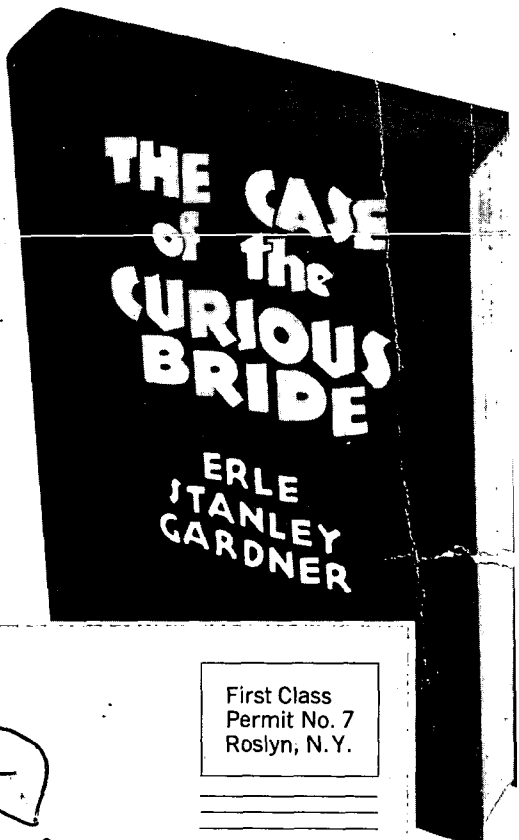

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